

BARACK OBAMA AND THE AFRICAN IDEA: TOPOLOGY, TROPOLOGY, AND STASIS
IN SPATIAL COUNTER NARRATIVES

By

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ABSTRACT

There is no region of world outside of the United States where Obama's meteoric rise generated as much excitement as in Africa. It is also uncontroversial to assert that Obama's rhetorical skill was a major factor behind his success. Yet surprisingly little work has been done on the intersection of Obama's discourse and its effect on Africa. This study endeavors to fill this gap in the scholarship on Obama. Drawing on the tools of rhetoric—theories about topology, tropology and stasis, this dissertation traces the visions of Africa implicit in Obama's rhetoric and politics. The study analyzes Obama's ideas of Africa in three stages of his political career; before he was a national figure, during his campaigns, and in his Africa policy after he became president. In short, I argue that the ideas of Africa conveyed in the discourse of Obama challenge conventional wisdom on the continent's significance in global affairs. While demonstrating Obama's visions of Africa, the study also demonstrates the utility of rhetorical theories in both domestic politics and international relations.

There are three findings that emerge from this study. First, is the finding that Obama does not subscribe to other people's ideas about the continent. He developed his own understanding of the continent from his experiences. Second, Obama believes that the wellbeing of Africans is fundamentally connected to American politics. Finally, Obama understands African countries' relationships with the United States outside of the narrow realism of war on which virtually all of his presidential predecessors have relied in their dealings with African nations in the past. In that regard, the study shows that Obama's discourse about the continent marks significant a break in the history of U.S.-Africa relations.

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Chara chimwe hachitswanye inda

(Shona proverb meaning “You cannot crush a louse with only one thumb”)

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CHAPTER I: Charting Obama's African Visions

In its announcement of President Barack Obama's nomination as the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, the Nobel Committee made specific mention of the global impact Obama's rise to the presidency had produced. "Only very rarely," they wrote, "has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future."¹ The Committee was right: for many around the world, Obama's election represented "one giant leap for mankind" as the British newspaper, *The Sun*, noted.² Although it was celebrated around the world, Obama's victory resonated particularly well on the continent where Obama's father was born, Africa. For the first time, a person directly linked to an African heritage had ascended to the most powerful office in global politics. Through Obama, who many in Africa viewed as a son of the African soil, the American presidency came closer to the continent than it had ever been before. This was a new era in the history of American-African relations. As a result, Obama's rise represented unprecedented hope for many people of African descent both at home and in the diaspora. African historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza explains,

The elevation of a Diasporan African to the presidency of the most powerful country in the world marked a watershed in the cruel history of Euro-African relations that began half a millennium ago and is characterized by the savagery of racism and the dehumanization of peoples of African descent. The symbolism of this historic moment was palpable, although its full substance remains to unfold. It is part of the remaking of the Pan-African world that began with the abolitionist movement, followed by the struggles for independence in Africa and the Caribbean, the civil rights movements in America, and crowned by the demise of apartheid in South Africa.³

Barack Obama is indeed part of the "remaking of Africa" of which Zeleza speaks. In ways never before imagined, Obama's discourse on Africa deviates from conventional thinking about the global

significance in the twenty-first century. Ever since Obama became the inspiration of hope for millions around the world as the Nobel Committee recognized, Africa's symbolic relationship to the rest of the world, especially to the United States of America, and to the concerns and aspirations mutual to all humanity have seemed more fluid, more contestable, and more exigent than at any time since the demise of colonialism 50 years ago. No longer is Africa understood simply the world's dark and uncivilized continent, or as the planet's convenient bastion for humanity's most difficult challenges. Through his writings and speeches, Obama developed one of the most forceful challenges to entrenched modes of imagining Africa. His is a rhetoric that rearticulated the place of the continent vis-à-vis globalization, American politics, and international relations. What follows is an account of three particular ways by which Africa is remade in Obama's discourse.

I believe the conceptual tools of rhetoric—in particular theories about topology, tropes, and stasis—offer a powerful means of explaining the distinctiveness of Obama's visions of Africa. There are three reasons why the methods and insights of rhetorical criticism offer the best way to render Obama's African ideas in clearest relief. First, rhetoricians recognize that language, like all other symbols, parlays in abstract substitutes for concrete reality.⁴ Because the realm of language is the realm of abstractions, language cannot fully replace that for which it stands. It only represents reality by reducing it to representative ideas. All discourse about space is therefore in effect, always a creation of ideas about that space. In other words, language quite literally creates spatial imaginations that always misrepresent some aspect of the place for which they stand. Hence when it comes to Africa, one can agree with Joseph Achille Mbembe that “There is no description of Africa that does not involve destructive and mendacious functions.”⁵ One cannot speak of Africa without somehow impinging on some aspect of the African reality. Many rhetoricians take as a matter of principle that language is so integral to the human encounter with spaces that our sense of place

cannot exist outside of rhetoric's productive capabilities. Hence Henri Lefebvre argues that ideas about space are produced at the nexus of both the "imagined" and the lived experience.⁶ Given this, then, the rhetorician's task in tracing the ways in which discourse generates particular ideas of spaces begins at language's inauguration of a sense of place. There is nowhere better to begin the inquiry into the conceptions of space than with accounting for language's fundamental impact on how space is understood. This is the first reason why this dissertation takes rhetoric as its point of entry into the inquiry about how Obama contributes to the creation of new imaginations of Africa.

The second reason why the rhetorical approach is well suited for understanding Obama's African visions is because rhetoricians also attend to the fundamental relationship between rhetorical practices and politics. Ever since the days of the classical Greek *polis* and the Roman *res publica*, rhetorical studies in the Western tradition have recognized that there is a mutual imbrication between rhetoric and politics. Rhetorical practice—specifically giving speeches was a fundamental political activity for citizens in the Athenian *polis*. In fact, Aristotle and Isocrates both believed that rhetoric was a practical art (*phronesis*) ideally suited for the service of the democratic city-state. One can see the centrality of rhetorical practices in the form of government passed down to us from the Classical era; democracy is the most *rhetorical* form of government. In the 2500 years since the height of Athens and Rome, scholars have developed many elaborate theories on the relationship between rhetoric and politics; what they have not done is turn away from the idea of rhetoric's political nature and politics' rhetorical nature.⁷ More recently, deliberative democracy proponents citing Walter Lippmann and Harold Lasswell's famous studies have made the task of unveiling rhetoric's function in the remediation of the public sphere their clarion call. Hence John Dewey, for example, argued in *The Public and its Problems* that, "Communication alone can create a great community."⁸ Dewey's ambitious formulation pointed to the considerable potential rhetoric has to

impact politics. More explicitly, Dewey was recognizing that rhetoricians realize both that discourse impacts the politics inherent in the places of its dissemination at the same time that political dynamics shape rhetorical practices across different locations. Such is the interest of this study, as I explain Obama's ideas of Africa, I attend to both to his visions' potential effect on the material conditions of African life, and to the circumstances that resulted in the particular ideas of Africa propagated in Obama's discourse. The focus of this study is therefore not just about the persuasiveness of Obama's African ideas; I am also interested in the ways that Obama's ideas of Africa overlap with Africa as it is understood both on the continent proper and abroad.

Third, the tools of rhetorical criticism offer a powerful lens through which one not only understands the role of language in creating a sense of place, they also provide a basis for apprehending discourses' constituting function on perceptions of places. If language creates a particular sense of a place, rhetorical criticism allows one to explain differences in how a place is perceived in terms of how language depicts that place. This point is germane to this study insofar as the visions of Africa propagated in Obama's rhetoric and documented in the following pages are not the only perceptions of the continent that are popular today. Africa is a place about which there are numerous particularly negative ideas. Historians John Parker and Richard Rathbone explain that "the modern idea of Africa emerged from the dehumanizing crucible of Atlantic slavery."⁹ As a result, many ideas of Africa in circulation today echo many of the themes first invoked to rationalize the emergence of slavery and imperialism. As a result, many contemporary representations of Africa are products of what Jean and John Comaroff identify as "discourses of the imperial imagination."¹⁰ Curtis Keim's appropriately titled *Mistaking Africa* documents, for example, that "the overwhelming impression gained by studying American language about Africa seems to be that Africa is a primitive place, full of trouble, and wild animals, and in need of our help."¹¹ These colonial ideas of Africa are

so pervasive, argues anthropologist James Ferguson, that “the world is (perhaps now more than ever) full of talk, not of specific African nations, societies, or localities, but of “Africa” itself.”¹² This “Africa talk” not only elides the diversity and multiplicity of the African experience, it often reifies stereotypes about the continent and its peoples. Specifically, Africa is produced in the discourse, Achille Mbembe notes, as a space “in short, of nothingness.”¹³ It is portrayed as a foil for the progress, prosperity and the political advancement found in Europe and the United States.

For postcolonial scholars like Edward Said, James Blaut and others, these discourses form the influential perceptions of Africa at the heart of what is known as “Eurocentric Diffusionism.”¹⁴ Eurocentric Diffusionism is the spurious idea that Africa’s development necessarily trails in the footprints of the European experience because the process of civilization is diffusive and spreads outward from the European “center” toward the African periphery.¹⁵ This view in turn sanctions simplified explanations for Africa’s underdevelopment. The continent’s “backwardness” is accepted by Eurocentric Diffusionists as a consequence of the fact that Africans have yet to undergo the chronology of events Europeans endured in the prelude to their discovery of civilization. Alternatively, the difficulties of African life also appear “normal” to diffusionists because of Africa’s distance from civilization’s purported “epicenter” in Europe.

The visions of Africa implied in the rhetoric of Obama not only differ from these stereotypical impressions of African nations and their peoples; they also establish a basis for more egalitarian relations between Africans and the United States. In his discourse, Obama portrays the region in ways that are very different from the conventions of the colonial imagination. To Obama, Africa is not a blank canvas onto which the imaginations of former colonial powers can be projected. Not only are the people and places of Africa real to Obama, he understands them as fundamentally connected to the fates of the rest of the world. As he made explicit in Ghana, “I do

not see the countries and peoples of Africa as a world apart; I see Africa as a fundamental part of our interconnected world.”¹⁶ In the following pages, I chart in a chronological and conceptual manner, the unique ways Obama came to understand Africa.

Literature Review

Obama and the rhetorical tradition

Obama has already been a favorite subject of study for scholars from across the disciplines. Yet despite the attention he has received, surprisingly little academic work has been devoted to linking his political philosophies to his itinerant childhood. This section reviews the literature from rhetorical and cultural scholarship on Obama to demonstrate the need for analyses of the ways Obama impacts the societies he grew up in and how those societies in turn bear their mark in his politics. This dissertation is concerned with the overlapping ways that Obama has influenced ideas of African life, and reciprocally, how Africa has affected him.

Too much has been written and said about Obama’s meteoric rise that any attempt to summarize all the different studies would be an exercise in futility. For that reason, I confine my review first to the robust conversation that has emerged among rhetorical scholars about Obama before turning to a few of his cultural biographers. There is little doubt that Barack Obama’s path to the presidency was paved in no small part by his oratorical skill. Writing on the importance of rhetoric to Obama’s emergence to national prominence, Mary Frances Berry and Josh Gottheimer explained in *Power in Words: the Stories behind Barack Obama’s Speeches* that,

Obama’s speeches were his trademark on the campaign; few other contemporary politicians have possessed his gift for writing and delivery. During his campaign, Obama’s words helped create a movement. Americans hung on his every word. They blogged about his

speeches; they tuned in on their televisions and computer screens; they got involved in numbers never seen before.¹⁷

With such eloquence, Obama was sure to become a popular subject of study for rhetorical scholars. Indeed he has proved to just as popular a subject for rhetoricians as he has been an excellent speaker; scholars in rhetoric have produced numerous conference papers, journal articles, journal special editions, and several book length studies of different aspects of Obama's rhetoric.

The key theme that has emerged from studies of Obama's rhetoric emphasizes his reliance on compromise and common ground as responses to the contingencies of American public life. In the first treatment of Obama to appear in a major rhetoric journal, David Frank and Mark Lawrence McPhail explained for example, that in his 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote, Obama articulated a "rhetoric of consilience" which functioned through the "translation, mediation, and an embrace of different languages, values, and traditions."¹⁸ Reading the same speech, Robert Rowland and John M. Jones argued that in the speech Obama framed the American Dream as "a balance between individualism and communal responsibility."¹⁹ Likewise, Robert Terrill drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois studied Obama's "A More Perfect Union" and found that the speech relied on double consciousness to endorse a "vision of the nation as a single entity composed of differentiated parts."²⁰ Derek Sweet and Margret McCue-Enser echoed the same theme when they observed that during the 2008 campaign, Obama's stressed that "the ability to address national shortcomings does not rest with the individual American, *per se*, but in his or her willingness to come together as individual members of a community."²¹

Scholars have also observed that Obama has extended his consilience to matters stretching beyond the realm of domestic American politics. In foreign policy, Robert Ivie and Oscar Giner

found that Obama “inspired the living heritage of American exceptionalism with a familiar yet transforming, sense of interdependency”²² to develop what they called “democratic Exceptionalism.” In his discussion of Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Obama’s response to the 2008 financial crisis, John Murphy found that even in economics “for Obama there is *always* a transcendent place of agreement above two opposing theses.”²³ Thus by the time Frank wrote his introduction to the *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* special issue on Obama in 2011, he could assert that “If there is a recurring pattern in [Obama’s] discourse, it appears to be his struggle with binaries: reason/faith, individual/community, security/liberty, war fighting/peace building.”²⁴ In short, rhetoricians have linked Obama’s consilience—or his rhetorical blueprint—to the hallmark *topoi* of American public address—American Exceptionalism,²⁵ the American Dream,²⁶ the American prophetic tradition,²⁷ pragmatism,²⁸ and civil rights²⁹ to name but a few.

What has escaped emphasis is that along with these thoroughly American roots, Obama’s rhetoric has influences that are as geographically, culturally, and intellectually diverse as his wanderlust childhood. The 18 years he spent in Honolulu and Indonesia, the trip he took to Pakistan during college, and the African sojourn he took in search of his paternal family all affected his understanding of the world in fundamental ways. Obama, like “the millions of U.S. children (an estimated 20 million since the advent of mass air travel) who have been carted abroad by their missionary, diplomatic, corporate or military parents,”³⁰ was a citizen of the world well before he stepped into the spotlight. His cosmopolitan childhood made him what sociologists John and Ruth Useem in the 1960s labeled a “Third Culture Kid” or TCK.³¹ TCKs are noted for having a flexible view of reality and an ability to perceive the world from multiple cultural perspectives.³² This propensity for openness seems to have been the sensibility Obama wanted when he appointed fellow TCKs (Valerie Jarret, Timothy Geithner, and James L. Jones) to key positions in his cabinet.³³

With this in mind, it seems clear that turning to Obama's cosmopolitan biography has plenty heuristic potential for advancing our understanding of Obama. Surprisingly, for all the attention rhetoricians have lavished on Obama, none have attempted view his discourse using perspectives from beyond the familiar theoretical lexicon.

Africa: the Strange Absence

Rhetoricians however, are not unique in looking askance at the cultural and intellectual insights on Obama from beyond the American mainstream. It is only within the last year that some among Obama's biographers have made arguments connecting his openness to his background in Hawaii and Indonesia.³⁴ Kenya and Africa, which were also influential in Obama's development, have thus far barely warranted anything more than a glancing mention. Some have gone so far as to minimize the significance of Kenya as a vital source in Obama's tapestry of influences. David Mendell, who published the first authorized Obama biography for example, in a passage citing Michelle Obama, wrote that, "No matter how much Obama had philosophized about his Kenyan father, she told me, that Pacific island [Hawaii] held even more answers to Obama's complex persona."³⁵ Dinesh Sharma's psychobiography was more crude if not direct in its dismissal of Obama's Kenyan heritage: "Although Obama Sr. contributed significantly to the Obama family's gene pool, he was, in the final analysis, primarily a sperm donor in his son's life." So it is with Michael Haas. In *Barack Obama, the Aloha Zen president*, Haas asserts rather provincially that "life in Hawai'i made a profound impact upon Barack Obama. He views Hawai'i as a model for the United States as well as for relations between governments in the international arena."³⁶ Notice the subtle, but systematic exclusions of Kenya and Africa in these discussions of the places that influenced Obama early life.

In a sense, both the academic literature and biographies of Obama reproduce the very problem Obama's discourse on Africa challenges; they undermine the power and significance of African contributions to global culture. This is true particularly in the rare cases that Kenya and Africa are explicitly evoked, as is the case in David Remnick's exhaustive *The Bridge*, or in Peter Firstbrook's *The Obama's* where Kenya and Africa serve only as the rustic background out of which Barack Obama Sr. and the Obama clan emerged.³⁷ Fewer than twenty pages in Remnick's 660 page tome are devoted to Obama's African experience. This despite the fact that when Obama wrote about his own life he meditated at length on the spellbinding curiosity he had about the land of his father's birth. Similarly, Firstbrook's book, though a fascinating account of the history of the Obamas and the Luo people, can only conclude tentatively that, "Obama seems to have inherited his willingness to be direct, open, and honest from his grandfather Onyango."³⁸ Both books fail to discuss any links or speculations about how Obama's politics was affected by his African background. There is likewise equally little written of Obama's impact on the continent.

Obama himself, however, suggests otherwise; in his writings and speeches, he repeatedly grants his African experiences significantly more credence. In the climactic end to his memoir at his father's graveside in Kogelo, Kenya, for example, Obama has the epiphany that his "life in America—the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago—all of it was connected with this small plot of earth."³⁹ One cannot fully grasp the totality of Obama's complex identity without sufficiently addressing his Kenyan experience. Likewise, as I show in Chapter two, Obama never shied away from invoking his father's African roots in many of his political speeches. To the contrary, he invoked Kenya and Africa repeatedly when he was in the middle of fighting for the highest office in American politics. His African background was indivisible from his American politics.

The value of this study is therefore twofold. First, this dissertation, by focusing on the intersection between Obama and the discourse on Africa, sheds light on one of the least investigated aspects of his rhetoric. Second, this study brings rhetorical theory to bear on the already vibrant discussion about representations of Africa. In so doing, the project reveals the particular ways that Obama understands Africa. In addition, the study stresses the importance of both Obama's rhetoric along with the political value of his ideas of Africa in the project to remake Africa. This dissertation therefore tracks the trajectory of Obama's ideas of Africa chronologically as he progressed from being an insecure young man to becoming one of the most admired politicians of our time.

Methodology

To fulfill the twin purposes of the study, this project strives for the ideal Karlyn Kohrs Campbell had in mind when she coined the term enduring criticism.⁴⁰ "Enduring contributions of criticism to rhetorical theory," she wrote, discover "forms that permit and evoke participation, of processes that transcend argumentative controversies, of transformations that restructure perceptions and create perspectives, of syntheses of substantive stylistic stratagems that form genres of rhetoric, and of archetypal forms of interaction."⁴¹ In other words, what distinguishes enduring criticism from criticism of the ephemeral kind is that the former deepens the theoretical lexicon by adding to it through analyses of discourse that identify patterns that extend beyond the specificity of a singular rhetorical occurrence or a singular rhetor. To produce enduring criticism, the critic must both understand and appreciate the uniqueness of a particular rhetorical artifact, and be able to evaluate or explain the rhetoric's effectiveness in ways that connect it to what is known about the discursive logics. Campbell's standard of enduring criticism demands that the critic hold in equipoise what Edwin Black called the "etic" and "emic" perspectives on the object of criticism.⁴²

For Black, the critic who “presupposes that what is known in rhetoric is embodied in rhetorical theory” functions in the etic mode.⁴³ Working deductively, the etic critic uses the concepts of rhetorical theory to explain and judge the function of rhetoric. As such, critics working in the etic mode favor theoretical over discourse specific explanations of the function of rhetoric. In order for etic criticism to contribute to rhetorical theory, it must do more than merely explain the function of a rhetorical encounter using the jargon of rhetorical theory. To be enduring, etic criticism must draw from its explanation of rhetorical phenomena inductively to modify the theoretical corpus. Thus enduring etic criticism is the outcome of a critic successfully establishing a reciprocal relationship between discourse and theory: theory illuminating rhetoric, and the rhetoric enabling the critic to better match theory to lived experience. Only then will etic criticism transcend the ephemera of a specific rhetorical event and find lasting significance.

Along with the etic mode, Black discusses emic criticism. Emic criticism, he notes, is “criticism that interprets its object on the object’s own terms.”⁴⁴ To approach rhetoric from an emic standpoint is to view it first and foremost in its own time and circumstances. The emic critic does not import a priori principles to the interpretation of the object of study. Rather the emic critic understands the discourse as a particular phenomenon occurring in a particular moment with particular effects. Here, the critic’s focus is to explain the rhetoric alone—the critic who operates in the emic mode does not allow him/herself to be affected by prior intellectual commitments—s/he only asserts that which the discourse empirically validates. Yet if this is all that emic criticism does, Campbell would dismiss it as ephemeral; it would lose veracity as soon as the conditions in which the discourse emerged change. In order to attain lasting significance for the products of emic criticism, one must find a way to both see the discourse for what it is, and also see beyond the discourse. Black himself suggests that emic criticism “would acquire intellectual respectability only

as it moved toward or issued in general truths about human experience.”⁴⁵ If etic criticism turns to the inductive in order to broaden theory to become enduring, emic criticism must reciprocally lead to some deductive principles which can be extrapolated beyond the original rhetorical encounter to become enduring. Stated briefly, enduring criticism holds the etic and emic approaches together. It both draws on and adds to the concepts of rhetorical theory, while simultaneously laying out the specific nuances of discourse and highlighting general insights out of each rhetorical encounter that it covers.

These are the dual demands that my analysis of the three case-studies presented in each chapter of this dissertation brings to bear on the particular rhetorical visions of Africa Obama developed at different stages of his political career. Each chapter traces Obama’s African vision chronologically—that is, following along the general progression of his political career—as well as conceptually through the application of rhetorical concepts. On the one hand, I track the visions of Africa portrayed in Obama’s discourse through three distinct phases of his political career. On the other hand, my analyses draw on and contribute to theories about rhetorical topology, rhetorical tropology, and stasis respectively. I turn to a general overview of the visions of Africa implicit in Obama’s discourse before he was a presidential candidate, during the 2008 campaign, and after he was elected president in the remainder of this chapter.

Plan of the study

Chapter two

Before Obama was a politician and statesman of international repute, he thought about Africa during his struggle with the absence of his Kenyan father. For this reason, the second chapter focuses on the personal narrative Obama develops in his autobiography, *Dreams From my*

Father. Dreams was originally published in 1995, but was reissued in 2004 with very little revision.⁴⁶

Obama, in the third section of the book recounts the experiences he had on his first visit to Kenya. An important lesson Obama learned from his pursuit of an answer about his identity was that his life story would only make sense when taken as an amalgam of the different strands of his background. Thus Kenya in particular and Africa more generally, along with Hawaii and Indonesia were all necessary parts of the tapestry of Obama's cosmopolitan childhood.

Ever since his first trip to Kenya, Obama has turned to his wanderlust childhood for a tonic whenever he has felt the threat of insecurity. In other words, Obama's ability to reconfigure linkages between the places of significance in his life was an essential ingredient in his process of finding comfort in his identity. To do this, he had to abandon the commonplace view of Kenya, Hawaii, and Indonesia as places separated by insurmountable geographical and cultural spaces. Indeed, the facts of Obama's life compelled an alternative perception; as a person whose childhood had been shaped in significant ways by all three places, Obama needed to understand them together regardless of their physical geography implied to make sense of his life. In Obama's life, Kenya, Hawaii, and Indonesia existed alongside each other not as disparate entities as they are in conventional geography. His was a childhood that did not conform to the separatist vision most people have when they think about places as far afield as Africa, the Pacific Islands, and Southern Asia. It was only when he was able to think Kenya, Hawaii and Indonesia together rather apart, that Obama finally found peace about his own identity.

As part of his response to the identity crisis he dealt with throughout much of his youth, Obama reoriented the geography of his world. He developed his own ideas of Africa in lieu of the visions of the continent that were circulating in the world around him. The ideas Obama developed are best understood in light of spatial rhetorical theory. Specifically, I adopt Michel Foucault's

adaptation of Aristotle's notion of *topoi* to the symbolics of space. Just as Aristotle in *The Rhetoric* provides a catalog of *topoi* or the common places to which one can refer in order to generate an argument, Foucault argued that different senses of place grow out of a similarly well-defined set of ideas which he called heterotopias.⁴⁷ Foucault's heterotopias function in the same manner as Aristotles *topoi* in that they are seats or sources for generating different senses of places. When Obama resisted the shadows public discourse cast over Africa, he did so by articulating his own progressive understanding of the continent by using some of the particular conventions of spatial invention identified by Foucault. Drawing on his experiences growing up in different parts of the world, Obama challenged static conceptions of Africa along two axes. First, the account of Africa he developed in *Dreams* showed Africa to be a heterotopia of difference, or a place the perception of which was driven by the idea of difference. In other words, one of the ways Obama defined Africa was as a place that encompasses representations of multiple other places within it.

Second, Obama presented Africa as a temporal heterotopia, or as a space defined by the *topos* of time. For Obama, Africa was distinguished by its incorporation of aspects from across many periods in the progression of time. From this meditation on the development of Obama's early African vision, I suggest that before he was a politician of national repute, Obama used what I am calling heterotopic rhetoric—which is discourse that generates a sense of a place out of a specific set of inventive resources along the lines of the spatial *topoi* outlined by Foucault. The chapter shows how through heterotopic discourse one can exert one's agency in the realm of space by altering the meaning that space holds. To fully establish the distinctness of Obama's ideas of Africa, I also review coverage of the trip he took to several African nations in 2006. In the review I show that while Obama embraced a dynamic vision of the continent, media coverage of his 2006 trip did not get beyond old ways of thinking about Africa in its coverage.

Chapter three

From Obama's earliest days and his use of heterotopic discourse, I turn in Chapter three to the visions of Africa that appear in his campaign discourse. The chapter documents the invocations of Africa in Obama's rhetoric and in discourse about Obama that circulated between Obama's emergence as a national political figure and his inauguration. I begin by focusing on the birther movement and use evidence from the legal cases they brought against Obama's eligibility for the presidency to show that the birthers supported an exclusionary vision of America as a society that had no use for external influences—specifically Obama's African influences. In addition to legal evidence, I also attend to the visions of Africa in the writings of Jerome Corsi and Dinesh D'Souza two writers that are frequently cited as authorities in birther discourse. Against the birthers' refusal to accept Obama's African roots, I pose the African counter-narrative Obama developed as he campaigned. I read the most significant speeches in which Obama invoked Africa. To this end, I revisit his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech, his speech at Brown Chapel A.M.E. in Selma, Alabama and his now famous "Speech on race" from Philadelphia.

As Obama entered the fray of national politics in 2004, he extended his practice of reordering the spaces of his existence in order to help him make sense of his world. When he campaigned, he evoked his African background for the express purpose of reimagining the idea of American society. Even as he endured derision about his Kenyan heritage and name, Obama argued forcefully that the African portion of his biography was just as essential a part of American politics as any other cultural heritage. As far back as the stump speeches he gave when he campaigned across Illinois for state office, he would repeatedly introduce himself by explaining that "my father was from Kenya, Africa" and "my mother was from Kansas."⁴⁸ These were not just run of the mill biographical details deployed for the sole purpose of familiarizing Obama to potential voters;

Obama used the details of his disparate origins to foreground his preference for so thoroughly pluralistic a vision of America, the markers of his Kenyan heritage would seem mundane. Thus his 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention “was structured to go from a passage on autobiography to a one connecting the speaker to the diversity and history of the nation.”⁴⁹ As he said, “I stand here knowing that my story is part of a larger American story.”⁵⁰

I argue here that because the idea of Obama’s African origin was a perennial source of controversy during Obama’s campaigns, Africa in fact became a proxy for competing visions of the American Dream. To trace the contours of these different visions, I turn to the rhetorical theory of tropes. Specifically, I argue that Obama used his Kenyan background to portray himself as a metonymy for a version of the American Dream that connected the aspirations of people from around the world. Obama’s political opponents by contrast viewed him as a figure of a vision of America that was tainted by influences from without. From this analysis, I show that difference between Obama’s invocations of Africa and those of his opponents was that Obama’s American Dream was cast in the mode of irony which allowed it to be inclusive. The American Dream embraced by Obama’s opponents on the right by contrast, had no tolerance for anything outside of the White American experience. In his politics, Obama’s biography was a representative anecdote of the vision of America in which Obama believed. By thus portraying the totality of his life’s story as a representative of the broader national narrative, Obama theorized his African background at the very center of American politics. In speaking of America as a crossroads of diverse cultures including his own Kenyan background, Obama challenged the idea of Africa as a remote place that is disconnected from the currents of civilized life in the Europe and the United States.

Chapter four

Chapter four turns to the period after Obama ascended to the presidency contrasting the staging of Africa in Obama's Africa policy with that of George W. Bush. To illustrate the utility of the rhetorical approach to foreign policy, I compare Obama's two speeches in Africa—in Cairo, Egypt⁵¹ and Accra, Ghana,⁵² to the Africa speech his predecessor gave on February 14, 2008. After attaining the highest achievement of his political career in 2008, Obama challenged the traditional treatment of Africa as a junior partner in United States policy. Obama signaled this shift early in his presidency. Within six months of his inauguration, he had visited Africa twice setting the precedent for the earliest an American president has travelled to the continent. Even though Obama's trips to Africa thus far match the total taken by two of his most recent predecessors in number, his early journeys to Africa suggested that Africa was a higher priority for his administration than it was for either Bush or Clinton. George W. Bush's two trips to the continent and Bill Clinton's three, all came after each man had been in office for at least a year. Moreover, Obama was the first American president to deliver a signature foreign policy speech in Africa when he spoke in Cairo, Egypt on June 4, 2009.

Even more significant than the symbolism of his two trips to Africa, was the message Obama bore in his two visits there. "I've come to here to Cairo," Obama said, "to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world."⁵³ Though his Cairo speech was covered as a speech to the "Middle East," it was as Johnny Carson, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs' explained, in content and intended audience directed at Africans too.⁵⁴ Part of the reason that the speech resonated in Africa was because a quarter of the world's Muslim population resides in Africa where it constitutes close to half of the continent's population according to some estimates.⁵⁵ Obama confirmed that his message in Cairo was addressed at Africans as well

when, in his speech in Accra a month later, he quoted directly from the first speech. In Accra, as he had done in Cairo, Obama proclaimed a change in American policy for Africa. He said he wanted a new beginning, one “grounded in mutual responsibility and mutual respect.”⁵⁶

For those attentive to the history of U.S.-Africa relations, Obama’s declaration of a new era of mutuality suggested a tectonic shift for American policy in Africa. As I show in Chapter 4, the American government has, for the most part, viewed African nations through the frame of war—beginning with the Barbary Wars, through the Cold War, wars against hunger, poverty and HIV/AIDS, to the war on terror. This is true of modern American policy towards Africa which began with the 1958 launch of the State Department’s Bureau of African Affairs as the Cold War was getting underway. During the 1960s when much of Africa began to emerge from the throes of colonialism, the U.S. was completely immersed in the Cold War. As a result, U.S. engagement in Africa for close to four decades shifted inconsistently depending largely on how the different African nations fit in U.S. strategy. African nations were reduced to being extensions and sacrificial lambs in the battle between the competing ideologies from the West and Far East for greater influence around the world. Since war is a zero-sum game, U.S.-Africa policy was thus crafted with little or no attention to the interests of Africans themselves. After the Cold War ended, Africa policy architects in Washington could no longer rely on anti-U.S.S.R rhetoric to guide the American mission in Africa. For a while American policy went without an overall direction. The lack of a meaningful strategy for Africa in American foreign policy stood out most glaringly between the end of the Cold War in 1991 and 2001 when the war on terror returned America to relating to Africa through the familiar trope of war.

Against this background, I juxtapose Obama’s Africa policy to that of George Bush. I argue that even though both Obama and Bush framed their respective engagements in Africa using the

same language of partnership, they believed in vastly different conceptions of partnership with Africans. This can be seen when one attends to the particular ways each president configured the partnership with Africa. Drawing on the basic precept of stasis theory which dictates that no discursive relationship is possible unless the participants agree to the terms of the relationship, I show that it was Obama, not Bush whose rhetoric laid the foundation for reframing U.S.-Africa relations. Unlike Bush, whose terms for partnership with Africa amounted to little more than coercing African support for the war on terror, Obama's rhetoric advanced human rights and aspirations as the basis for the partnership he wanted with African nations. In suggesting anything other than war as the basis of U.S. interests in Africa, Obama registered a significant break in U.S. policy for the continent. Even though it is too early to tell whether Obama's attempt to take U.S. relations with Africa beyond the frame of war, it is worth noting that his erstwhile attempt culminated a lifelong trajectory in Obama's discourse toward the remaking of Africa.

Chapter five

In the final chapter, I summarize the findings of this study. In addition, I consider some implications that grow out of the key findings from this study. With Obama not having returned to Africa since his first year in office, it might appear that he has lost interest in the continent. However, Africa still figures prominently in American politics. Regrettably, it is now clear that despite the frivolity of their case, the "birthers," are unwilling to relinquish their meritless case against the legitimacy of Obama's presidency. Equally as discouraging is the fact that U.S. policy in Africa is yet to achieve some of the goals promised in Obama's discourse. I conclude by considering the opportunities for further study.

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CHAPTER II: Obama and the African Heterotopia

As Obama's star on the global stage began to rise, a robust conversation about what his success signified for Africa began to take shape. For many lay Africans, "Obama was not simply an American political leader but also an African kinsman, a son of African soil, who was destined to change Africa."¹ Others were more cautious in their reading of the continent's prospects in light of Obama. Though they acknowledged that Obama's emergence was symbolically significant, groundbreaking even, the African intelligentsia refused to allow that realization to undermine the fact that "no one knew what Obama's election would mean for Africa."² As Obama took office and made his first two official trips to the continent, opinions about him there remained fragmented predominantly along these lines. Curiously, questions about what Africa meant to Obama or about how he had come to understand the continent were discussed much less frequently. Yet, it may have been in this neglected regard, that Obama may have affected Africa's long-term future most significantly.

Part of the reason why interest in probing the nuances of Obama's African visions has been muted is because it is easy to assume that Obama, like many of his American compatriots, holds simplistic ideas about the continent. Many Americans, Curtis Keim argues, are guilty of "mistaking Africa", holding onto mindless stereotypes of the continent as a jungle, culturally monolithic, and an overall primitive space.³ A cursory consultation of Obama's writings before he became a famous politician shows, however, that his opinions of Africa developed out of a great deal of thoughtful and deliberative analysis. Obama spent a lot of time thinking about his connection to Kenya especially because of his father's absence. By written volume alone, Kenya and through it the African experience, is a topic Obama actively returned to over a period of time longer than what he invested in thinking about many of the things for which he is famous (with the exception of his

meditations on race relations.) Obama read about Africa during his childhood in Hawaii, thought about it through his college years, and when he began his community organizing work in Chicago. In addition, he wrote about it in his first book. And, as was the case with race, the trajectory of Obama's understanding of Africa began as a series of hazy generalizations influenced largely by what he learned and heard about the continent from others. However, as I show below, one of the signs of Obama's intellectual growth was his refusal to uncritically imbibe in the opinions others had of Africa. By his mid-thirties, when he was writing about his childhood, Obama had developed his own distinct perception of Africa.

We know from *Dreams from My Father* that Obama's introduction to thinking about Kenya and Africa started when his mother tried to familiarize him with Kenyan history, particularly in the period right before his father returned to Hawaii on his only visit in 1972. Without her own first-hand experiences on which to draw, the perspective of Africa Anne Dunham conveyed to her son through conversation and book recommendations was of the academic type; cold, detached, and impersonal. Unsurprisingly, Dunham's ideas of Africa did not provoke her son's interest: as he wrote "I retained very little of the information she offered. Only once did she really spark my interest."⁴ After his father's arrival, Obama learned more about the continent directly from his father both in their private interactions and when the elder Obama spoke about Kenya at Barack's school. Even then, with his father's first-hand accounts, the younger Obama remained unenchanted with Africa. In *Dreams*, he recalled having to remind himself to pay attention when his father spoke at his school.⁵

Indeed, it would be wholly unremarkable to assert that a ten-year-old boy was uninterested in his mother's attempts to inculcate respect in him for a culture and place she hardly knew. It also makes sense that the same child would be indifferent to his estranged father's descriptions of the

same strange and exotic place (particularly in front of his peers). However, I want to suggest that the ambivalence Obama displayed in response to his parents efforts to endow him with knowledge of Africa was a significant precursor of how he would respond to the other ideas of Africa he would encounter later in his life.

I argue in this chapter that as Obama explored and developed answers for his own questions about how he understood Africa, he not only set forth a rhetorical model of understanding the continent that breaks with tradition of thinking about Africa in stereotypical ways; in so doing, he also found a panacea for his deeply personal longings for a place to belong. As he explained in the introduction of the 2004 edition, *Dreams from My Father* is “a record of a personal, interior journey—a boy’s search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American.”⁶ To be sure, the plot of *Dreams* recounts Obama’s quest for self-assuredness and dabbles in the U.S.’s intractable struggle with racism. However, *Dreams* is at heart a book that develops a sense that all humans have a need to belong. It argues, in other words, that a fundamental resource by which people find balance with their identities is by establishing the sense that there is a place somewhere that they can call their own. The book begins with young Obama in a perpetual crisis of self-doubt that is driven by the uncertainty of his race and the absence of his father. By the end, a more mature Obama has emerged, and he feels “like the luckiest man alive”⁷ as he writes in the final sentence. Suspended between the despair the book begins with and the exhilaration at its close is a captivating account of Obama’s travels from Hawaii to California, to New York, Chicago and finally Kenya before he found comfort and security with his station in life.

The book’s epigraph, 1 Chronicles 29:15, is a fitting preamble. It is a verse in which King David concludes a worshipful lament by noting that the Israelites’ lives are ephemeral especially in comparison to God specifically because they had no permanent dwelling or a place in which they

belonged. To King David, the Israelites are most dissimilar from God in that their “days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.”⁸ Finding a place to belong, and ending their desert sojourn, so to speak, was the elusive shibboleth David thought would make the Israelites more God-like. Thus, even before the reader encounters a single word of the text itself, he or she is aware that the book is somehow tied to the vulnerability the great king sensed for his people because they did not have a place to belong. According to the book’s progression, it is clear that if Obama can find his own dwelling place, his wanderings, both figurative and literal can also come to an end. In this light, the trip he to Kenya he recounts in his memoir’s final section marks the solution of his personal crisis.

Given how deeply intertwined his understanding of Africa was in the development of his personal sense of identity and security, Obama was understandably extremely guarded and particular in his appreciation of opinions about the continent. Through much of his life, he was reluctant to accept conceptions other people had of Africa. This is clear in, for example, his reaction to the different ideas of the continent that he encountered in Chicago in the days before he made his maiden voyage to Kenya. There he would discover that for both his African-American colleagues and himself, “Africa had become an idea more than an actual place, a new promised land, full of ancient traditions and sweeping vistas.”⁹ Yet despite the impassioned idealisms of Africa he heard in Chicago, and the fact that Obama was only a generation removed from the continent, these nostalgic sentiments failed to foster a sense of intimate connection to Africa in Obama.

Apart from coworkers, Obama also heard about Africa from his half brother and sister who shared their opinions of the homeland with him before his first visit. However, despite hearing their tales of how ambition, nepotism, and how the politics of greed in Kenya had destroyed his father, that was not the image of Africa on which Obama settled. His sense seemed to be that going to

Kenya to see for himself would be the best way for him to finally find comfort in his knowledge of the continent. As late as the moment when he was on the Nairobi bound plane, Obama chafed under the imposition of his British seat companion who tried to foist “his dim view of Africa”¹⁰ on him. Again, Obama dismissed the Briton’s stereotypes, not only because they were contemptible and wrong, but because they did little to assuage the peculiar anxieties he felt as “a Westerner not entirely at home in the West, an African on his way to a land full of strangers.”¹¹ What Obama seemed to want in deciding to go to Kenya was to find his own understanding of his father’s African background with the hope that such knowledge would help mitigate his personal feelings of insecurity.

In each of these instances that he was offered a particular vision of Africa, Obama clearly repelled those ideas because they were not his own. To that extent, Africa remained for him, shrouded behind a fog of the guises with which it was presented. It was not until after experiencing the continent for himself during his 1988 trip to Kenya that Obama solidified ideas of Africa that he could own. The pages of his memoir, *Dreams from My Father* therefore chart Obama transitioned transition away from the ideas of Africa that were in popular circulation among his peers and broader society. The visions of Africa he came up with in this transition are form the crux of his understanding of Africa.

To understand the earliest ideas of Africa Obama developed, I turn in this chapter to the intersection between rhetoric and place. There is a longstanding tradition in rhetorical theory that recognizes that rhetoric is thoroughly imbued with the sense of place.¹² In his *The Rhetoric*, for example, Aristotle identified *topoi* or topical places as resources to which a rhetor can turn to generate persuasive appeals¹³ For Aristotle, place is productive of argument in that persuasion is a

search for discursive locations in which arguments hang together enough to secure the adherence of the audience.

One finds a similar process when considering the senses of places that people have. The notions that people have about physical locations like “home,” “cemetery,” or “hospital,” are not given; they are arguments about certain places that have secured acquiescence from portions of society enough that those discursive sense become synonymous with certain feelings. A sense of place, to put apply Aristotle’s topical formula, confirms nothing more than the fact that there exists a location (or set of locations) about which a certain body of discourse has attained adherence amongst a significant mass of people. Reciprocally, the success of arguments in Aristotle’s topological account signifies the location of a discursive place where persuasive claims about the contingent hang together. The invention of place therefore manifests in the geographical realm what happens to arguments in the discursive realm. It was Michel Foucault who, in 1967, distinguished rhetorical *topoi* from the spaces of invention in geography when he introduced his notion of “heterotopias.”¹⁴ Heterotopias, he argued, are “other places,” because they enable one to develop alternative senses about places than are in common circulation. Just as *topoi* serve as openings to novel appeals for persuasive discourse, heterotopias, enable one to generate alternative perceptions of a place. Heterotopias, one might say, are the specific *topoi* unique to spatial rhetorics.

Through his employment of discourse intended to foster new ways of understanding Africa, or what I call here a “heterotopic rhetoric,” Obama evoked a vision of Africa that was at once complex and open to a plurality of understandings as part of his response to his personal tribulations. For Obama, any claims about the continent were always open to contestation. Understood as Obama saw it, Africa was not just an autonomous space standing in isolation from the rest of the world but a but a dynamic place with meanings that change over time and are open

to various interpretations by individuals. Obama resisted the temptation to hold unchanging views of Africa.

To understand the specific meaning that Barack Obama attached to Africa before entering politics, I focus on the period before he declared for the presidency in 2007 and read his visions of Africa from the vantage of spatial rhetorics. While concern about the human encounter with and through space has been studied for a long time in disciplines such as architecture and geography, it is only within the last decade that scholars in rhetoric have focused their attention on the rhetorical processes that shape our sense of space and place. This chapter engages this nascent conversation by using Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopias to account for the ideas of Africa Obama presents in *Dreams*.

According to Foucault, heterotopias are "real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites."¹⁵ Obama's African vision, I argue, presents the continent as one such real place; one that also functions as a site with many contested meanings. In Obama's analytical discourse, Africa is not a place with a static meaning, but a space imbued with the sense of many different places (what Foucault called a heterotopia of difference), and a place in which one can come into contact with the experiences referring to many different time periods (a heterotopia of time). To highlight the heterotopic dimension of Obama's vision of Africa, this chapter contrasts representations of two of the five trips he has taken to Africa to date. I begin by reviewing news coverage of his 2006 trip to show that many of those accounts relied on two static conceptions of the continent: Africa as a lifeless scene on which the saga of American politics played out, and an Africa whose interests form the basis for judgments about global politics. It is against these unchanging visions of Africa that Obama through his heterotopic discourse cast a dynamic and plural conception of the continent.

Following that, I turn to Foucault's theory of "other spaces" to explain Obama's heterotopic perspective of Africa before discussing the anecdotes Obama's presents in *Dreams* through which he negotiates his heterotopic vision.

Covering the Senator's "homecoming"

In August 2006, Barack Obama took a widely celebrated third trip to Africa. At the time, he was not only the first American legislator of African parentage; he was also emerging as a viable candidate for the presidency. The ensuing coverage of the trip reproduced two equally stagnant visions of Africa. First was American press coverage of the trip, which portrayed the places Obama visited as backgrounds that garnered significance only because they were locations in which the rise of a popular American senator took place. Reporters in the Kenyan press by contrast were less enamored with Obama's soaring political trajectory. They instead used his trip to contemplate his role in the continent's future.

According to the *Chicago Sun-Tribune*, Obama's 2006 trip was intended to "highlight the importance of the continent to the United States and the rest of the world."¹⁶ The reason that the security and wellbeing of African peoples gained renewed salience in the post 9-11 world was because leaving Africa on the margins of world commerce increased the continent's susceptibility to terrorist ideologies. Fittingly, the countries on Obama's 2006 itinerary—South Africa, Kenya, Djibouti, and Chad—could not have been better suited for showcasing the existential challenges faced by millions of Africans. Each country was struggling to stave off the effects of a deadly combination of postcolonial Africa's biggest threats: famine, poverty, violence, AIDS (and other diseases), and poor governance.¹⁷ In light of this, an Obama spokesperson told *The Chicago Sun-Times* editorial board on a separate occasion that Obama had planned the journey to "call attention to the importance the well-being of African nations has to the United States."¹⁸

During the trip the senator did his part to confront the problems. In South Africa, he spoke out against the Thabo Mbeki government's scientifically implausible position on HIV/AIDS. At the University of Nairobi Obama challenged students to reject corrupt leadership and tribal politics.¹⁹ He also toured the Kibera slum in Nairobi and heard about the difficulties members of a microfinance project struggled with; he and his wife took a public HIV test in Kisumu; and he visited (and donated money to) an orphan nutrition project run by CARE International.²⁰ When he got to Chad, Obama insisted on listening to the stories of both refugee men and women from Dafur in Sudan.²¹ It seemed as if Obama was fully aware that his visit could be construed as that of celebrity politician who parachutes into the constituency for the day and leaves after meaningless photo operations thus he tried very hard to secure tangible outcomes during his brief time on the ground.

By the amount of attention Obama's 2006 trip attracted, it can only be compared to that given to the African excursions of his two of his more famous Democratic forerunners: Robert Kennedy (who went to South Africa in 1966), and Bill Clinton (who went to Ghana, Uganda, Rwanda, South, Botswana, and Senegal in 1998). Yet if celebrity is what Obama, Clinton, and Kennedy's African sojourns have in common, it is also a measure for what distinguishes the latter two from Obama's African adventure. There is no doubt that both Clinton and Kennedy were popular in Africa because their trips confirmed their commitment to the welfare of the continent's largely black population. As a result, Clinton's visit, only the second official trip by a sitting American president, did more to reinforce his standing as America's "first Black president"²² than it did by way of changing U.S. policy in Africa. Similarly Kennedy's show of solidarity with Soweto's oppressed Blacks was embraced more for its timeliness in linking the struggles for Black equality on two separate continents than for its effect in advancing the end of South African racism. In Obama's congressional visit, by contrast, Africans not only saw an ally and an authoritative voice,

but a savior from within. Because Obama was a son of an African, his visit was not just another diplomatic excursion by an aloof and unconnected official; it was a homecoming.²³ Like all other homecomings, Obama's had been highly anticipated. Since his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech the subsequent republication of *Dreams from my Father*, and his election as a U.S. senator from the "Land of Lincoln," Obama's popularity had grown across Africa as it had elsewhere around the world.

While Obama and his advisors clearly played into the senator's newfound popularity to advance his political prospects, they also used the trip as an opportunity to bring attention to a broad array of substantive issues affecting African life. Unfortunately, Obama's engagement with the challenges Africans were dealing with received much less media interest compared to the political story. For the American press and their devout followers at home, for example, the importance of Obama's humanitarian and diplomatic work on the trip lay in that both were measures of the senator's competence as an American leader on the global stage.²⁴ Success on this front would fulfill an important step in securing public confidence in Obama's presidential capabilities. For this reason, the highlight of Obama's trip was not the five hundred thousand people the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) told Obama would be tested for HIV as a result of the public test he and his wife taken,²⁵ nor was it the publicity Obama brought to the tragic experiences of the disenfranchised inhabitants of Kibera or Darfur refugees he listened to in Chad. The biggest story, the story that received the most attention on this view, was the trip's effect on the Obama's White House prospects.²⁶ That the trip was successful on this measure was clear in Robert Gibbs's post-trip assessment of his boss's chances of being president: "We definitely looked at it at something that was now plausible. It would not be a whimsical thing."²⁷ For most people who viewed the trip as a pre-campaign trip, the places Obama travelled to in Africa were empty

containers, nondescript backgrounds against which the next scene in the unfolding drama of the life and rise of Barack Obama played out.

The fascination with Obama's domestic political prospects was not unanimous. Along with the barrage of reports about euphoria and excitement Obama had set off, some op-eds reflected on what the rise of Obama would do for African standing in U.S.-Africa relations and in world affairs. Whereas in the first view, Africa was just a stage on which world's drama plays out, this latter view flipped the script and focused instead on what Obama's ascent would mean for Africa. In this telling, Africa's interests were the governing lens through which Obama's trip was understood. An editorial in *The Daily Nation* explained the intrigue thus,

Africa has changed, the world's view of it has not. In places such as America, Africa is still viewed as a dirty beggar, a suffering place in the grip of atrocious poverty and disease. To some extent, and in some places, this is true.

But there is an emergent Africa, a more confident, smarter, self-reliant Africa. And it is the message of this new Africa that we would like Senator Barack Obama to take back home with him: It is possible for Africa to pull itself out of the morass, perhaps not overnight but certainly in our lifetime.²⁸

In this view, the import of Obama's trip was less about the man and his political ambitions than it was about the continent of his father's birth and its standing in the world. Africa was no longer typecast a perennial eyesore in the world's affairs; here it was understood as a place of progress. Instead of seeing Africa as an empty container, Obama's African critics understood Africa as vibrant place, one that was full with the diversity of life and pregnant with prospects of the future.

Given that these two ideas of Africa dominated coverage of Obama's 2006 trip, it is clear that the trip's coverage understood Obama in Africa from perspectives that were not Obama's. Not only did the reporting paint a broad and unchanging picture of Africa; in either case, Obama's actual ideas of what Africa was as he experienced it in such places as Robben Island, Kibera, the University of Nairobi, and in Chad, received little attention. Coverage of the trip reprised the familiar and unchanging conceptions of what Africa represents. On the one hand was a static vision of Africa as a peripheral background, a distant remove on which the drama of American politics unfolded. On the other, the discourse revealed an equally stagnant African-centered perspective; Africa was always the victim, always misunderstood, and taken advantage of by the world's powers that refused to acknowledge its progress. Each view limited the possibility of what Africa can mean to the possibilities evoked in that particular discourse. To establish the alternative account of Africa Obama subscribed to, I turn next to the rhetorical concept of heterotopia.

Toward heterotopic rhetorics

Michel Foucault introduced the idea of heterotopias in a lecture he delivered in 1967 titled, "Of other spaces."²⁹ In that lecture, Foucault contrasted heterotopias to utopias, which he defined as "sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real places of Society."³⁰ In other words, utopias were, for Foucault, recognizable because they are representations of space in the abstract; utopias have no material existence in the world as people experience it in everyday life. By contrast, heterotopias exist within the spatial networks of the actual world. Put differently, heterotopias are different from utopias in that they belong to spatial networks that are native to the culture in which they exist. Foucault used the example of a mirror to illustrate how heterotopias differ from utopias. For him, a mirror is utopian in that, "it is a virtual space that opens up behind the surface" of the glass. To view an image in a mirror is to perceive something that exists entirely

in the reflective ether even though it may be a representation of a thing that exists in the real world. In this sense, utopias are a dimension of space that an individual can never really experience. For this reason, Foucault's utopian spaces are *terra incognita*.

However, Foucault also saw mirrors as exemplars of heterotopias. While they are windows to the virtual, mirrors still occupy actual space in the world; they claim a spatial existence in the local. In order to see a mirror's image of yourself you must stand in front of a mirror which exists in the real world. As heterotopias, mirrors are not just parts of native geographies; what distinguishes heterotopias from utopias is that they bridge the chasm between real and imagined spaces. Heterotopias, Foucault writes, are "a kind of effectively enacted utopia."³¹ They are real places one encounters, but heterotopias also have an existence in the realm of imagined spaces. What makes heterotopias work as heterotopias, in other words, is that they imbue in an individual who stands in a particular place and time with a sense of being in another time and place: heterotopias are at once *terra firma* and *terra cognita*. When you stand in front of the mirror, you experience the familiar sense of looking upon yourself from the outside even though such a perspective of yourself is not feasible without mirror's magical inversion of space. In short, heterotopias are spaces in which one experiences exotic or non-existent spaces through local and material places. Heterotopias are displacements of real space into the realm of the exotic and surreal.

To establish the significance of heterotopias, in social life Foucault articulates them to places linked to six functions in any community's social life. First, heterotopia functions as a place for the displacements of persons undergoing growth crises. Here Foucault suggests honeymoon destinations, boarding schools and other places of ritual separation as examples. Heterotopias of crises are places to which people withdraw when they are undergoing significant transitions in their lives. Second, Foucault identifies places for the displacement of individuals who have violated

societal norms. While most human societies have infirmaries and places of incarceration, a hospital in Kansas is quite different from the hospital that operates at Karanda, Zimbabwe. Likewise, a jail in Mexico City is quite different from a jail in Las Vegas. What binds all hospitals and prisons together in the heterotopic view is there are actual places designated for people who have in some way defied what it means to be normal in society; these are what Foucault called heterotopias of deviation. The third type of heterotopia functions as a place where one can encounter many different places by in a single place. Foucault's uses the example of gardens to typify this function. Gardens, he notes, can grant one access to the vegetarian experiences of many places around the world via a single plot of land through plants from different regions of the world. Similarly, an airport, seaport, or train station, all incorporate within them individuals and artifacts from a wide variety of places. Both places are heterotopic because they function by the principle of inclusion; they are spaces for the simulated experience of distanced places in the confines of a single local space. The fourth type of heterotopia is the temporal heterotopia. Of these, Foucault notes that they are places that combine within themselves references to multiple points in the passage of time. Foucault points to museums and libraries as exemplars of this type of place because in them one can access many periods of time outside from his own. Fifth, are heterotopias that function as places of controlled or mandated access. Houses of worship for the different religions, access to which is reserved for adherents or potential converts are what Foucault calls heterotopias of purification. Schools where attendance is mandatory for all members of society up till a certain age are another example of this type of heterotopia. Finally, heterotopias function as commentaries on the spaces to which they are connected. Here Foucault suggests two ways that heterotopias can critique real places. The first is that they expose the constructed nature of what is otherwise perceived as immutable reality. As an example, consider a dinner table at a fast food restaurant; while the table in the restaurant is real, it is a simulated substitute for an altogether different place—the dinner table at

home. Both are, however, linked by their function as symbols of the ritual consumption of food. A second critique that critical heterotopias pose is the “compensatory critique.” Heterotopias provide compensatory critiques of place when they evoke exotic spaces which possess attributes that are lacking in the local environment. One visits, for example, a wild game preserve to encounter flora and fauna that exist outside the pale of mundane experience in the spaces in which s/he lives. To generalize across these six functions, one could say heterotopias are actual places within a localized geography that simultaneously free one to understand the place free from the limits imposed by existing geography and conceptions of that place. This generalization points to the liberatory potential that heterotopias possess; they offer six ways to ascribe alternative meanings to places that have acquired a standing meaning in the societies in which they exist.

Reading Foucault’s account of heterotopias it is easy to overlook the fact that all heterotopias are products of rhetorical invention: heterotopias are discursively constructed ways of relating with places. As Douglas Reichert Powell notes, “senses of places and region are not so much essential qualities, imparted by singular events, practices or topographical features, as they are ongoing debates and discourses that coalesce around particular geographical spaces.”³² There are, in fact, bodies of discourse that function to imbue places with the sense of “other spaces.” The label heterotopic rhetoric applies to such discourse. Rhetoric functions heterotopically to the extent that, in its presentation of a space, it fulfills any of the functions Foucault identifies as markers of heterotopias. Put differently, heterotopic rhetoric functions by evoking a sense of places as simultaneously real and local, and also ethereal and dispersed. Such rhetoric enjoins its observer to witness the different ways in which a place is at once embedded in its local spatial environment, and stands apart from the local geographic milieu in its presentation of a more disperse geographic culture. As a general rule, heterotopic rhetoric is discourse that is deployed with the intention of

challenging understandings of places that are based on *prima fascia* or “permanent” understandings of the places.

Obama’s consistent rejection of other people’s interpretations of Africa manifests this principle. His autobiography develops heterotopic understandings of Kenya and Africa that contest the outdated senses of the continent upheld in other African discourses as Mudimbe,³³ Mbembe,³⁴ and other critical Africanist scholars have shown. Obama’s topography of Africa complicates isolationist accounts of the continent. In the following section, I closely analyze how Obama presents his own African vision through a series of four anecdotes. In the stories he tells of his first time in Africa, Obama relies on two of the heterotopic functions specified in Foucault’s typology: he uses heterotopias of difference and temporal heterotopias. Three of his anecdotes broaden the meaning of African spaces by highlighting how Kenyan and African places evoke and overlap with places in other regions of the world. When he turns to the postcolonial marketplace in Africa, he treats it as a sight where one can encounter perceptions of Africa grounded in different time periods.

Dreaming of Africa

After carrying the burden of self-doubt through his early twenties, Obama decided in 1988 to go to Kenya hoping that finding out more about his father and extended family would put his insecurities to rest. In Africa, Obama not only met his father’s distant relatives, he also did something most visitors to Africa rarely ever do; he immersed himself fully into the experience of life as it is experienced by millions of Africans daily. The book’s third section (which is appropriately titled “Kenya”) is therefore approximately split equally between detailing his reactions to the history of his family that he learned while in Kenya, and Obama’s reactions to the African perspective on life. The contours of Obama’s perspectives on Africa emerge through his reflections on anecdotal experiences he had while in Kenya. By thinking through these experiences, Obama

developed a heterotopic view of the continent; he understood Africa as a place whose significance and meaning was an unsettled question. Obama, through the anecdotes he selected to exemplify his African experience, suggested that Africa is both a heterotopia of difference and a temporal heterotopia.

The section of *Dreams* that focuses on Africa begins with Obama aboard a plane leaving London's Heathrow Airport for Nairobi. Sitting next to him is a British geologist headed for an apprenticeship in a South African mine. The geologist tells Obama that his internship in South Africa was a product of mere circumstance—South Africa lacked people with the expertise he had. In response, Obama infers to the geologist that he has an alternative understanding of the shortage of skilled labor in South Africa. For him, the shortage of skilled workers is in fact a product of the history of the exclusion of native Black South Africans from meaningful economic opportunities. Nonplussed by Obama's sagacious analysis, the geologist chooses to end the conversation. Neglecting Obama's invitation to further contemplate how racial, political, and racial dynamics worked in his favor the geologist pulled on his headphones and went to sleep. Despite the exchange's terse end, Obama's point was clear; he would not suffer uninterrogated perceptions of African life. This airplane caveat is strategically marks the beginning of the section in which Obama presents his own African vision which he juxtaposes throughout the book's last section to perception of the continent that he rejects.

The first anecdote Obama recounts describes an episode that occurred right after his arrival at Kenyatta International Airport. Soon after landing, Obama found that his luggage had been lost in transit. Upon inquiring about his missing bags, Obama was helped by an airline official who not only recognized his surname, but said she came from a family that had been friends with his father. The experience triggered a heartwarming recognition for Obama,

I found myself trying to prolong the conversation, encouraged less by Miss Oromo's beauty—she had mentioned a fiancé—than by the fact that she'd recognized my name. That had never happened before, I realized; not in Hawaii, not in Indonesia, not in L.A. or New York or Chicago. For the first time in my life, I felt the comfort, the firmness of identity that a name might provide, how it could carry an entire history in other people's memories, so that they might nod and say knowingly "Oh, you are so and so's son." No one here in Kenya would ask how to spell my name, or mangle it with an unfamiliar tongue. My name belonged and so I belonged, drawn into a web of relationships, alliances, and grudges that I did not yet understand.³⁵

In that instance, Obama had found a place where he belonged. This was where he seemed to fit in, where his name and skin tone exemplified the rule rather than the exception. Even more importantly, this was where his entire existence was weaved into a web of connections.

That feeling of being linked to many people was crucial to how Obama defined his African experience. "In Africa," he would think to himself, "family seemed to be everywhere: in stores, at the post office, on the streets and in the parks."³⁶ In other words, Kenya for Obama reformed the very idea of public space. Kenyan public spaces, from airports to the spaces of commerce and leisure that Obama went to all had a communal feel to them that was "an obvious contrast to the growing isolation of American life."³⁷ In Kenya public space was transformed; it became synonymous with the idea of extended family. These places were no longer just spaces where citizens converged on the guarantee of free access; they were places where the autonomous individual could be enmeshed in the extensions of one's family. Even so, Kenyan spaces remained contemporaneous to public places in other societies. In light of Obama's dual redescription of public space in Kenya—as having a specific local function and being linked to a dispersed network

of public spaces—Obama discovered one might say, the heterotopic function of public spaces. Through his encounters in the public places that he went to in Kenya, Obama found a way of comparing and contrasting his American experiences to Kenyan life. Thus, he could meditate about the differences of what family meant in America and in Kenya, and how his filial obligation played out in both places.

Connectedness not only linked African people to each other in a vast family network and allowed Obama to think about his life on both sides of the Atlantic. It also linked Africa itself to other places around the world. The communitarian sentiment, Obama noted was “what [Americans] sacrificed for technology and mobility, but here—as in the kampongs outside Djakarata or in the country villages of Ireland or Greece—remained essentially intact: the insistent pleasure of other people’s company, the joy of human warmth.”³⁸ Through his own ability to think about filial obligation in Kenya and America, Obama discovered Kenyan public spaces as heterotopias of difference that were linked by the sentiment of belonging. They offered an experience that was at once specific to the Kenyan and African societies, but the same time embedded those communities in spatial networks of public spaces everywhere around the world.

From the densely populated public spaces of Nairobi, Obama turns to the expansive terrain of the Rift Valley in the second anecdote he gives that demonstrates his vision of Africa as a heterotopia of difference. After two weeks in Kenya, Obama successfully coaxed his reluctant sister Auma to go with him to the Maasai Mara, one of Kenya’s premium wildlife viewing destinations. A motley cast of characters from Kenya and beyond went to the Mara along with Obama and his sister. First there was Francis, the Kenyan driver and tour guide whom Obama notes preferred to spend most of his time farming in the countryside rather than being in the city. Francis was assisted by Rafael the cook and two Masai men who kept guard overnight. Francis’ neice, a man from Italy,

and an English couple who lived in Malawi rounded out the group. Among his fellow tourists, Obama took a favorable inclination toward the male partner of the British couple, Dr. Wilkerson. Wilkerson had grown up in Kenya and had great feelings for the country, but realized that because of “the sins of my father, you know,”³⁹ it would be preposterous for him to call Kenya his home. The two Masai young men for their part contradicted the statist myth of the Masai as “the noble savage of picture postcards and coffee table books”⁴⁰ or relic of a “pure” African cultural past. They along with other Masai individuals Obama met on the trip proved that the group was not the anachronistic monolith they are often mistaken to be, but an eclectic collection of individuals. There are Masai men and women who offer tours of their homes in exchange for money. Moreover, one of the two young men who watched over the group at night admitted to trying unsuccessfully to move to Nairobi after realizing his culture’s customs were no longer practical for him.

From this diverse mix of views on the Mara, Obama conjured a powerful sense of the African safari as a heterotopia of difference. There, Obama experienced a variety of places evoked by and through the individuals he met on his incursion into Masai Mara: Italy, Britain, India, the United States, Kikuyuland, Malawi and the Kenyan countryside were all constituent parts of Obama’s experience. Beyond his experience of the ability of African spaces to contain within them tokens of various places around the world, Obama had a powerful encounter with nature’s sublime in the Mara. On his second day, he had an overwhelming sensation of how the Mara approximates the perfection of a time and place far removed from the contemporary world:

I thought to myself: This is what Creation looked like. The same stillness, the same crunching of bone. There in the dusk, over that hill, I imagined the first man stepping forward, naked and rough skinned, rasping a chunk of lint in his clumsy hand, no words yet for the fear, the anticipation, the awe he feels at the sky, the glimmering knowledge of his

own death. If only we could remember that first common step, that first common word—that time before Babel.⁴¹

In the rift escarpment, Obama found a close approximation of a perfectly pristine world. Importantly however, Obama's longing was not for any one of the places evoked by his experiences in the Rift Valley; what he longed for is the ability to "remember," or to recover a sensation of that other world. Even though he did not detail what he hoped would result from rediscovering the ability to imagine the world anew, it is safe to assume that Obama may have been thinking about what impact the ability to think beyond geographic limitations of the present would have in solving some of the challenges facing Africa.

The third anecdote Obama recounts in his book which makes the most explicit case for understanding Africa as a heterotopia of difference comes in the epilogue of *Dreams*. There, Obama records a conversation he had with historian Dr. Rukia Odera at her house shortly before he departed from Kenya. Despite all he had intuited during his travels across Kenya, Obama arrived at the historian's home confessing that he had "as many questions as answers"⁴² about Kenyan life. Unlike the Briton he had sat next to on the plane to Nairobi for whom the history and fate Africa were closed books, Obama remained uneasy about making brash generalizations about the continent. He, therefore, chose to remain open to the possibility that things could be and were different from how he understood them. The historian applauded Obama's inquisitiveness; she thought it better to have questions than to assume that things are one way. This was particularly a challenge, Odera explained, for Blacks who travelled from Kenya to the United States and vice versa "looking to find the authentic."⁴³

As Odera explained, many African and African-Americans' searches for a Nietzschean monumental past⁴⁴ in Africa were bound to fail because the idea of a pure past is itself more myth

than actual experience. Using the dinner of fish and *Ugali* (stiff cornmeal porridge) she had shared with Barack and Auma, Odera continued,

Look at this meal we are eating. Many people will tell you that the Luo are fish-eating people. But that was not true for all Luo. Only those who lived by the lake. And even those Luo, it was not always true...I will offer you tea. Kenyans are very boastful about the quality of their tea, you notice. But of course this is a habit from the English...Then there's spices we used to cook this fish. They originally came from India or Indonesia.⁴⁵

Odera not only disagreed with the search for a final sense of what Africa was like; she showed clearly how certain aspects of everyday life in Kenya were expressions of external influence. Odera viewed African life through a paradoxical lens; for her, there was no true sense of Africa possible apart from understanding it as a place that is inherently and inextricably connected with non-African spaces. Besides, Odera pointed out, the quest for a "real Africa" that is free of any connections to other place could lead one to undermine the significance of Africa's heterotopic qualities. This understanding of Africa as a real place with symbolic connections reaching far beyond the continent's boundaries was one of the insights Obama took with him when he left Odera's house. As he notes, the historian's "words would stay with me, bringing into focus my own memories, my own lingering questions."⁴⁶

If three of the four anecdotes Obama uses to clarify his vision of Africa develop a sense of the continent as both physical and real but also implicated in symbolic networks extending beyond the continent, his fourth episode brings to light the ways that the African postcolonial market place functions as a heterotopia of time. Obama came to the realization that the spaces of commercial enterprise in Kenya, compressed within them cultural dynamics from across a wide timespan after an unpleasant encounter he and his sister had on his second day in Nairobi at the café at the New

Stanley Hotel. While touring downtown Nairobi by foot, Obama and Auma decided to stop for lunch at the café which catered to a predominantly American and European tourist clientele. At the restaurant, an American family (that was ostensibly white) which arrived after Obama and his sister at the café was seated, ordered, and received food all before Obama and his sister received any attention from the wait staff. Incensed by the second rate service they received, Obama and his sister stormed out of the establishment after berating a Black African waiter for ignoring his own in order to pander to the “White man.”⁴⁷

In his reflection on the incident, Obama put on display his uncanny ability to transcend binaries by frankly assessing the merits of each position. This was a skill James Kloppenburg tells us Obama honed early on in his intellectual development. When faced with controversies that presented different, seemingly intractable positions, Obama’s default was to weigh the merits and faults of each position rather making an all-or-nothing choice.⁴⁸ When he thought about what had happened at the restaurant, his appreciation for multiple perspectives led him to quickly see that he and his sister had been caught at the ugly confluence of two opposite understandings of Africa. On the one hand was the view that understood the continent in a colonial light. This was the view of those tourists who visited because tourism authorities in African countries like “Kenya, without shame, offered to re-create an age when the lives of whites in foreign lands rested comfortably on the backs of the darker races.”⁴⁹ What these antiquarianists got was a taste of what to their minds was “an age of innocence before Kimathi and other angry young men in Soweto or Detroit or the Mekong Delta started to lash out.” Tourism was for them a means of turning back the hands of time, a way of going back to the colonial past and imbibing—even for just a few fleeting moments—in the discredited dream of Black African servility to the Caucasian race. For those tourists who did not actively pursue a return to the days of colonialism, that tragic past endowed Europeans with “a bedrock of confidence in their own parochialism, a confidence reserved for those

born into imperial cultures.”⁵⁰ Their African dreams aspired for African experiences frozen in time from the colonial era. This the racist tourists assumed was the only way to understand the continent. For people in these camps, episodes like what happened at the café were either expected, or just an unremarkable part of the African reality. There was little else to it. In the tourist industry that is ubiquitous in the new African reality, the anachronistically-minded tourists found an survival from the colonial past.

But inasmuch as the African experience of colonialism was not accounted for in most European retellings, Obama because he had committed to experiencing the reality of African life, realized that the postcolonial experience of tourism also played in an entirely different register for those to whom freedom had only recently come. In keeping with this tendency of assessing matters from both perspectives, Obama juxtaposed the views of Black Kenyans who saw what was happening in African tourism in a completely differently light to the European’s narrow perspectives. Without the privilege of pleasant memories from of colonialism, Africans had little choice but to embrace aspirations for their lives and continent beginning in stirring moment of independence and projecting into the future. Driven by wishes for their children’s prosperity, many Africans entered in tourist market as workers and occupied a tenuous space between having to appease former colonial masters while testing the limits of nascent Black majority rule in to order survive. The African laborer, Obama thought,

Remembers independence, the shouts of “*Uhuru!*” and the raising of new flags. But such memories may seem almost fantastic to him now, distant and naïve. He’s learned that the same people who controlled the land before independence still control the same land, that he still cannot eat in the restaurants or stay in the hotels that the white man has built...If he’s ambitious he will do his best to learn the white man’s language and use the white man’s

machines, trying to make ends meet the same way the computer repairman in Newark or the bus driver back in Chicago does, with alternating spurts of enthusiasm of frustration but mostly with resignation...Then again, maybe that's not all that the waiter is feeling. Maybe a part of him still clings to the stories of the Mau-Mau, the same part of him that remembers the hush of the village night or the sound of his mother grinding corn under a stone pallet...He can't escape his memories. And so he straddles two worlds, uncertain in each, always off balance, playing whichever game staves off the bottomless poverty, careful to let his anger vent itself only on those in the same condition.⁵¹

For African workers like the waiters at the restaurant the postcolonial economy was not simply a means for earning a living. Rather, it was a complex structure where one constantly struggled with the paradoxes and tensions of establishing the meaning of postcolonial life in Africa. Motivated by both the unending struggle against depravity and hunger, and the always-alluring dream of self-sufficiency enshrined in the sacred promises of independence, many held subservient positions in the hospitality industry more out of necessity rather than choice. In these positions, African workers came face to face with the reality that though independence had brought more opportunities for them to attain social progress, success was far from guaranteed. That reality did not, however, deter African workers from envisioning a future in which Africa would break once and for all from the history of White domination. As Obama understood it, the path that most African descendants took on their way to the commercial world in either Newark or Chicago and, importantly, in Nairobi and other tourist cities in Africa, took them through temporal heterotopias—places marked by experiences that gestured both to the history of colonial and racial oppression, and towards the optimistic prospects of a more egalitarian future.

At the end of the day, the idea of Africa Obama developed on his first visit to Kenya is one that is specific to the first hand experiences of encounters that he and others went through but one that remained fundamentally open to revision. By grounding his understanding of Africa narrowly in the experiences that he had had Obama made his vision of Africa amenable to the possibility that events and explanations he had not seen or experienced would transpire. Unlike representations of Africa in the coverage of his 2006 trip which dwelt on static ways of seeing Africa, Obama by casting the continent as a heterotopia of difference and time, opens the way for Africans to take ownership of the spaces they occupy by imagining and reimagining them as Obama does.

Conclusion

The search for a place that one can call one's own is a preoccupation not specific to Obama alone in *Dreams*. As the book presents it, this search is an experience that is mutual between Obama, his father and two grandfathers. Each man's life is dominated by a quest for a place he could be comfortable in his own skin—a place where each could claim as his dwelling. For Obama, that search culminates in the land of his paternal ancestors. Obama's African heterotopia not only challenged conventional perspectives about the continent; for him, developing a personal knowledge of the continent helped discover the resolution to one of the most important personal struggles of his life—the quest for a sense of belonging in the world. Obama's first trip to Kenya was therefore a quest for home, both literally and figuratively. While there, Obama not only retraced his father's footsteps; he used the trip to discern his own vision of Africa. While it is clear that Obama did not think of Africa as his home, his experience of living in and rethinking Africa was crucial to his understanding of life.

In the vernacular of many African settings, the feeling Obama sought on his first trip to Kenya is captured by the colloquialism “home squared.” Home squared, Obama learned from his

brother Roy, carves the subtle distinction that many working Kenyans make between their “ordinary houses” in urban areas where they are employed, and “the houses in the country, where [one’s] people come from. [The] ancestral home.”⁵² The city house is simply home—a place one retires to after a long day’s work. The rural home is as it is for millions of urban Africans across the continent, the real home, home-home or “home squared.” As much as home squared is a link to a person’s ancestral heritage, it is, most importantly, a place that *belongs* to the individual. Home squared is where the African can be fully him or herself; it contains within it the prerogative to be a place of one’s own making, it is not merely property that is passed through the generations. Thus, those who do not maintain their connection to home squared are considered “lost”⁵³ or “ghosts,”⁵⁴ incomplete in the personhood.

The finding of home or a place to belong is central to understanding the vision of Africa presented in *Dreams*; as he gained assurance in his own identity, Obama worked out his own sense of what the continent means in his life. By reworking what the continent meant for him personally, Obama can therefore be said to have found his home squared, the place that belonged to him and in which he was free to rearrange things. Against the static and stereotypical conceptions of Africa conveyed by mainstream representations of the continent, Obama’s heterotopic conceptions of Africa deployed rhetoric’s inventive faculty for the purposes of reimagining Africa.

Obama’s heterotopic vision of Africa also speaks to the practices of rhetoric and democracy that concern rhetorical critics. Obama’s heterotopic vision of Africa illustrates how discourse can generate ideas of places that allow people to transcend local and conventional understandings of the symbolic significance of places. Using the integration of similar experiences in places that are far apart, Obama reconfigured the spatial networks in which Africa is usually put and thus reimagined Africa’s place in the world. He saw how public spaces in Kenya while specific and local were also

symbolically connected to similar public spaces elsewhere in the world. Second, the understanding of Africa to which Obama came to also broke the temporal limits around the African experience. Through his account of the tourism industry, he showed that aspects of colonial Africa's tragic past remained alive and well. Through the African laborers working in tourism, Obama also envisioned the promises and prospects of postcolonial Kenya. Obama's African heterotopias demonstrate the potential that the rhetorics of place play in recasting understandings of places in way that neutralize negative stereotypes of the places.

¹ Robert E Washington, "African Foreign Policy in the Age of Obama," in *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, Volume 16 : Race in the Age of Obama*, ed. Marino A. Bruce and Donald Cunnigen (Bradford, GBR: Emerald Group Publishing Ltd, 2010), 4.

² Ibid., 6.

³ Keim, *Mistaking Africa : curiosities and inventions of the American mind*.

⁴ Obama, *Dreams from my father : a story of race and inheritance*: 64.

⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁶ Ibid., xvi.

⁷ Ibid., 442.

⁸ English Standard Version

⁹ Obama, *Dreams from my father : a story of race and inheritance*: 302.

¹⁰ Ibid., 301.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nedra Reynolds, "Ethos as Location: New Sites for Understanding Discursive Authority," *Rhetoric Review* 11, no. 2 (1993); Nedra Reynolds, *Geographies of writing : inhabiting places and encountering difference* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

¹³ Aristotle, *Rhetorica (Rhetoric)*, ed. Aristotle and Richard Peter McKeon, The basic works of Aristotle (New York: Modern Library, 2001).I.2.1358a

¹⁴ Foucault and Miskowicz, "Of Other Spaces."

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶ Lynn Sweet, "Obama trip to highlight U.S. interests in Africa," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, July 10 2006.

¹⁷ Wangari Maathai, *The challenge for Africa* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010). 9-11.

¹⁸ The Chicago Sun-Times, "Obama's Africa trip leads to many valuable successes," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, September 3 2006.

¹⁹ Barack Obama, Maureen Harrison, and Steve Gilbert, *Barack Obama : speeches 2002-2006* (Carlsbad, Calif.: Excellent Books, 2007). 130-9.

²⁰ Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power*: 338-74.

²¹ Bob Hercules, "Senator Obama Goes to Africa," (United State: Media Process Group, 2007).

²² Toni Morrison, "The talk of the town," *The New Yorker* October 5 1998.

²³ Lynn Sweet, "For Kenyans, senator from Illinois has come home," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, August 27 2006.

²⁴ In separate interviews, Obama's advisors told David Mendel and David Remnick that the trip had been designed to bolster Obama's foreign policy credentials.

²⁵ Hercules, "Senator Obama Goes to Africa."

²⁶ Remnick, *The bridge : the life and rise of Barack Obama*: 446.

²⁷ Quoted in Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power*: 375.

²⁸ The Nation, "Kenya; Here's how Obama can Help," *The Daily Nation*, August 27 2006.

²⁹ Foucault and Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces."

³⁰ Ibid., 24.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical regionalism : connecting politics and culture in the American landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). 14.

³³ V. Y. Mudimbe, "Discourses of Power and Knowledge of Otherness," in *Perspectives on Africa : a reader in culture, history, and representation*, ed. Roy Richard Grinker, Stephen C. Lubkemann, and Christopher Burghard Steiner (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

³⁴ Mbembe, *On the postcolony*.

³⁵ Obama, *Dreams from my father : a story of race and inheritance*: 305.

³⁶ Ibid., 328.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 328-9.

³⁹ Ibid., 355.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 350.

⁴¹ Ibid., 356.

⁴² Ibid., 432.

⁴³ Ibid., 433.

⁴⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the advantage and disadvantage of history for life* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1980).

⁴⁵ Obama, *Dreams from my father : a story of race and inheritance*: 433.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 437.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 311-16.

⁴⁸ James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama : dreams, hope, and the American political tradition* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2010). 85-149.

⁴⁹ Obama, *Dreams from my father : a story of race and inheritance*: 314.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 312.

⁵¹ Ibid., 314, 15.

⁵² Ibid., 369.

⁵³ Ibid., 307.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 388.

CHAPTER III: African Visions and the Tropology of campaign rhetoric

The dominant reading of Obama's references to Kenya and Africa during his campaigns between 2002 and 2008 suggests that he only alluded to his father's homeland as part of a stock biography he developed for the stump. David Mendell explains that as far back as 2002 when Obama campaigned for the Illinois State Senate, he had a standard speech,

He started with a basic framework and spoke extemporaneously from that, usually with similar themes carried throughout. He typically opened with the same joke about his odd name by saying that people invariably call him something else—"Yo mama" or "Alabama." This line always drew a laugh...The quip served to begin a short explanation of his unique biography. ("My father was from Kenya, in Africa, which is where I got my name. *Barack* means 'blessed by God' in Swahili. My mother was from Kansas, which is where I got my accent from"). He then launched to into the meat of the speech, which usually involved the gap he perceived between his own values and the course of the country as set by Republican leadership.¹

By the time he focused his attention on the 2004 U.S. Senate race, Obama had this speech down pat. During his last two campaigns before running for the presidency—first for the Illinois state Senate, and then for the U.S. Senate—Obama frequently relied on a variant of this standard speech. His famous 2004 Democratic National Convention speech was, therefore, in some ways just "a condensed, if more polished, version of a stump speech that he been honing for nearly two years."² In this view, the references to Kenya and Africa were obligatory footnotes, necessary parts, of Obama's campaign biographical profile.

There is, however, a more powerful explanation that can be added to this first gloss. Indeed, Obama's Africa references gave the American public insights into the family and childhood of the

man they eventually elected president. However, in addition to telling the public about Obama, the talk of Kenya and Africa during the 2008 campaign also reveals the ways that the idea of Africa was taken up at an important moment in American public culture. This is true even though Obama neither mentioned Kenya nor any of the other places that had shaped his childhood when he officially announced his presidential candidacy on a cold February, 2007 morning in Springfield, Illinois. From that point on, his Kenyan connection would figure prominently during the 2008 cycle. With Obama on his way to becoming only the seventh American president born to at least one foreign parent, and the only African descendent in that group, his rise attracted attention to his paternal connection to Kenya. As Obama tried to furnish the public with details about both how he connected to his African legacy and how it fit into his American story, the rhetoric of the 2008 presidential campaign became an influential conduit of contemporary visions of Africa in American politics.

The public nature of presidential politics creates a unique opportunity to better understand both the discursive practices that produce perceptions of Africa and, conversely, the extent to which such perceptions speak to what we know about rhetoric in American public sphere. To that end, this chapter carefully attends to references to Obama's African background by both Obama and his opponents. In what follows, I argue that the conceptions of Kenya, and more broadly, Africa that were deployed in the rhetoric of Obama during the campaign and that of his political opponents function as proxies for competing visions about the relationship between American politics to Kenya specifically, and Africa generally. On the one hand, Obama linked the ambitions of the paternal side of his family to the mythic aspirations contained in the American Dream and used his cultural otherness to broaden the appeal of the Dream. In other words, his allusions to the land of his father's birth functioned as more than just boilerplate language; they were an important vehicle by which he forged a link between the Kenyan reality and American politics. In Obama's American

story, Kenya (and by extension, Africa) was transformed from being a distant remove to being a part of the fabric of American culture. On the other hand, Africa was, to a vocal minority among those who opposed Obama, a *prima fascia* reason for his disqualification from American politics. Primarily through allegations of Obama's birth in Kenya, detractors cited Obama's Kenyan and African influences to mask their racially motivated rejection of Obama.

To explain the different ways that talk about Africa functioned during the presidential campaign, I turn to the theory of tropes first identified in the rhetorical theories of Peter Ramus, Giambattista Vico, and Kenneth Burke.³ While the first two are possibly most famous for using rhetoric's tropological nature to develop theory of rhetoric as mere style, for Burke tropes are more than just linguistic devices. Dave Tell explains that Burke through his theory of tropes "understands rhetoric as a core epistemological practice."⁴ Drawing on Burke, Hayden White notes similarly that tropes play "a role in the discovery and description" of what is unfamiliar in the world.⁵ Relying on this epistemological theory of rhetoric, this chapter explains how representations of Africa in campaign discourse articulated two competing understandings of the American Dream. Obama deployed his African background to portray himself as a metonymy for an ironic or inclusive interpretation of the American Dream. Meanwhile his opponents by contrast, refused to see the inclusiveness of Obama's version of the American Dream. They instead saw him as metonymy for a vision of America that was not exclusive enough because to them, he was racial and cultural "other," he was some one who was compromised by his connection to Africa. Consequently, they not only rejected Obama's American Dream, but Obama himself as he was a metonymy for an idea of America that was wholly unacceptable to them. This chapter, therefore, demonstrates the different ways that Africa is represented in American political discourse while demonstrating the applicability of rhetoric's critique of epistemology to campaign rhetoric.

Tropology, Epistemology, and Africa in the 2008 Campaign

According to White, the epistemic function of tropes occurs at two levels: through representation, and through juxtaposition.⁶ The first three tropes—metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche—make the unfamiliar familiar by relating it to what is already known. Each of these tropes assigns meaning to the novel by the logic of representation. Metaphor expresses the unknown in terms of what is known. Burke says metaphor “brings out the thisness of that, or the thatness of this.”⁷ Metonymy likewise gives sense to the unfamiliar by taking what is physical and tangible as a reductive representation of the metaphysical and conceptual. Synecdoche induces a sense of familiarity about the exotic by rendering that which is not known as either part of the existent regime of knowledge, or by suggesting that the unfamiliar can be understood as having part-whole relationships like those that are already known. In other words, synecdoche imports the unfamiliar into the established networks for knowledge.

Despite the differences in the specific ways that the first three tropes configure meaning-making, their representative logic is built on the verisimilitude of the existing symbolic system to the totality of reality. Stating something metaphorically, metonymically, or synecdochally serves to expand and reinforce, not question, a familiar linguistic catalog. However, as Burke’s famous symbolic edict reminds, all symbols select, reflect and deflect reality; no symbol can ever give a full account of reality. There is therefore an inherent risk in the first three tropes of what Burke calls “naïve verbal realism”⁸—the temptation to view symbols as perfect substitutions for reality. It is irony, the fourth trope that breaks open a path to seeing the perspectivism of different symbol systems. Irony dialectically compares different vocabularies’ representations of reality. For this reason, irony is the “anecdote that is conspicuously anecdotal, partial and incomplete, the anecdote that is conspicuously rhetorical, that recognizes itself as inducement.”⁹ In other words, irony is the trope of juxtaposition; it balances off the representations of the first three tropes against each other.

As an epistemological mode, irony demands openness, not hostility, to different culture's modes of representing reality.

Following Vico and White, I am making a distinction here between linguistic or grammatical irony (irony as a mere trope) and irony in the rhetorical-epistemological sense (irony as an attitude towards or way of speaking of reality). To be ironic in this latter sense is to establish a dialectical relationship between different ways of seeing reality and to abandon both the naiveté of symbolic absolutism and its opposite, the nihilism of relativism. Against these two extremes, rhetorical irony etches an alternative account of reality. It is what Burke calls is a metaperspective—the knowledge that “requires that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but *contributory*.”¹⁰ White puts it this way: “here is an attitude towards knowledge itself which is implicitly critical of all forms of metaphorical identification, reduction, or integration of phenomena.”¹¹ With irony, one compares and contrasts cultural orders while remaining open to the possibility that the symbolic representations of one's own experiences are not infallible. The ironist understands that there are other ways of comprehending reality than those present in one's understanding or cultural worldview. Therefore, to be ironic is to adopt Burke's comedic attitude toward different ways of seeing the world than one's own. Whereas the first three tropes can be said to parlay in metaphysics insofar as they attribute to cultural terminologies a *deus ex machina* status, irony, because it is skeptical about the veracity of cultural knowledge itself, operates in the realm of epistemology.

The point of irony is never to minimize or erase the difference that arises between competing representations of reality as much as it is to transcend the difference: through rhetorical irony one apprehends, through juxtapositions, differences between orders of knowledge. This, one could say, suggests that an acceptable symbol system in democratic society exhibits or includes an ironic sensibility. In order to function well, such societies depend on the reflexivity of the ironic

mode to foster an inclusive attitude toward cultural, religious and political others. However, when viewed from within the internal coherence of a less democratic and exclusive cultural orientation, irony is sacrilege and anathema; nothing incenses adherents of a symbol system more than the suggestion that the symbols that constitute their belief system are fallible. I am arguing that during the 2008 campaign, Obama specifically drew on his African background to cast himself through metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche as a representation of a particularly democratic and inclusive version of the American Dream. One could say the ultimate purpose or telos sought in Obama's autobiographical campaign discourse was to foreground the ironic impulse at the core of his American Dream. This inclusive overture was untenable to those who held a less ecumenical ideal of American society. Africa, to them was an impossible distance away from the realities of American life. Therefore anyone who, like Obama, had commitments to Africa and other places could be not be fully grounded in American life.

It might still seem that tropology and irony have little to do with politics and campaign rhetoric. However, this putative disjuncture becomes less problematic when one notes that the ironic posture imbues politics with an ethical dimension. Here is Burke once again: "true irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is indebted to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him."¹² To view things from the ironic frame, then, is to "deal *with man in society*."¹³ In other words, to be ironic is to view oneself as one among many who are equally susceptible to the imperfections and contingency of language. Thus, rhetorical tropology enjoins politicians to find through an ironic understanding, a "thinking together" of competing worldviews that animate the public sphere. For the only way to keep political controversies in a democracy from escalating into gladiator-type combat is for participants to remember that whatever their avowed ideological positions might be, they remain partial terminologies for a recalcitrant reality that

is best apprehended through the aggregative dialectic of the ironic mode. This is the sentiment manifested when Obama's referred to his African and American experiences together. By putting together in a compelling and concise manner, the many strands of his identity, Obama figured himself as the embodiment of an inclusive understanding of American society. His minority status, confirmed in his Kenyan background, was indispensable to the ironic understanding of American society he embodied. Before turning to Obama's American dream, I turn first to the societal ideal conveyed in the rhetoric of the birthers for purposes of comparison.

Birthers and the African Metonymy

While the metonymy of Obama's life resolved in an ironic understanding of the American Dream as I show below, his opponents, because they had restrictive view of American society, could not reconcile the distance they saw between the African and American strands embodied in Obama. Whereas Obama's connection to Africa was an essential part of the American story he told on the campaign, it became the most notorious reason his political opponents cited in justifying claims that Obama was not American enough to participate in electoral politics. This was nothing unique to the presidential race. Since 2000 when he challenged Bobby Rush in the Democratic primaries for a congressional seat, critics often brought up Obama's wanderlust background in their attempts to undermine his electability. In early 2008, however, what had been a cheap gimmick designed to gain an edge in Illinois state politics became a national headline when a ferocious movement began making a spectacle out of Obama's intercontinental parentage. For the birthers, the dual nature of Obama's heritage was *prima fascia* evidence of his dubious commitment to the United States.

Though it became a *raison d'être* for a segment of the far right especially after Obama won the presidency, birtherism originated during the Democratic primaries. Rumors about Obama's citizenship began among the Democratic supporters of Hillary Clinton early in 2008. As it became

inevitable that Obama was going to win the primary contest, Clinton's "most passionate supporters grasped for something, anything that would deal a final reversal to Barack Obama."¹⁴ Unable to find anything substantive at which to direct their frustration, a few latched onto a series of emails questioning Obama's place of birth and whether he is a natural-born citizen and began forwarding them.¹⁵ Philip Berg, a lifelong Democrat and NAACP member took matters furthest when he filed the first court challenge to Obama's legitimacy with the U.S. District court in Philadelphia.¹⁶

There were two main allegations leveled in the emails that circulated at the start of the birther movement. First, was the outlandish claim that Obama was born in Kenya. Supposedly, the story went, Obama's mother was either living in or was visiting Kenya late in her pregnancy and had failed to return to the United States before giving birth. Somehow, the theory continues, Dunham inconspicuously smuggled her newborn back to Hawaii before she went on to register his birth and surreptitiously post birth announcements in Hawaiian newspapers. Given the overwhelming odds against the plausibility of this account, it is surprising anyone would give it any serious thought.

The other theory peddled in the birther emails did not contest that Obama had been born in the United States. Rather, the quibble was that Obama's mother had not attained sufficient standing as an American citizen for Obama to qualify as a natural-born citizen at the time of his birth. Emails advocating this argument would insist that

Barack Obama is not legally a U.S. natural-born citizen according to the law on the books at the time of his birth, which falls between December 24, 1952 to November 13, 1986. [*sic*] Presidential office requires a natural-born citizen if the child was not born to two U.S. citizen parents, which of course is what exempts John McCain though he was born in the Panama Canal. US Law very clearly stipulates: "If only one parent was a U.S. citizen at the time of

your birth, that parent must have resided in the United States for at least ten years, at least five of which had to be after the age of 16."¹⁷

This theory became the legal basis for many of the challenges brought by Berg and the other prominent birther litigant, Orly Taitz.¹⁸ The logic was that since Dunham was 18 when Obama was born, she had not resided in the United State long enough to satisfy the five year requirement after age sixteen as specified in the law. If, because of this technicality, Obama's mother was not a citizen at the time of his birth, then Obama was not a "natural born citizen" of the country. As birthers frequently pointed out, the U.S. Constitution only permits natural born citizens to become presidents.

Despite a growing collection of rulings against it and the release of government sanctioned documentary evidence denying its claims, birtherism continued to grow.¹⁹ The movement somewhat counter intuitively only coalesced until *after* the Obama campaign posted a certified copy of the "short form" of his birth certificate on June 13, 2008, on the campaign web site.²⁰ Rather than put the controversy to rest, the move only led to a lawsuit by Berg that was understood to have demanded that Obama make public his original hospital-issued birth certificate and to more Americans believing in the birthers' malicious assertions. A poll conducted in Tennessee close to a year after the release of Obama's short form document found 30% of the general population and half all Republicans still thought "Obama was born outside the United States."²¹ The birthers would not be mollified by the types of argument and evidence normally admissible under the dictates of reasoned argument because their goal was never about vetting Obama's credibility as a candidate. To them, Obama metonymically embodied an unacceptable vision of America precisely because in his Black skin, Africa and America or (Kenya and Kansas) were figured together. Reading birther discourse shows that their sole goal was to keep Obama from becoming the nation's first Black

president and to remove him once he won the elections. To them Obama's American dream seemed like an unacceptable challenge to their close-minded perspectives of the birthers. The birther rejection of the American Dream represented in Obama is demonstrated in the original petition Berg filed in the first case he brought against Obama,

Plaintiff respectfully prays that this court:

A Declare that the Defendant Barack Hussein Obama, a/k/a Barry Obama, a/k/a Barry Soetero, a/k/a Barack Soetero, a/k/a Barry Dunham, a/k/a Barack Dunham is ineligible to run for United States Office of the President under the United States Constitution, Article II, Section I;

B. Preliminary and permanently enjoin the Defendant Barack Hussein Obama, a/k/a Barry Obama, a/k/a Barry Soetero, a/k/a Barack Soetero, a/k/a Barry Dunham, a/k/a Barack Dunham from running for United States Office of the President;

C Preliminary and permanently enjoin Defendant, The Democratic Committee from nominating Defendant Barack Hussein Obama, a/k/a Barry Obama, a/k/a Barry Soetero, a/k/a Barack Soetero, a/k/a Barry Dunham, a/k/a Barack Dunham as Democratic Nominee.

Notice that Berg did not ask the court to compel Obama to prove his legitimacy; he only wanted the court to sanction his belief in Obama's ineligibility. Otherwise put, despite talking a lot about making Obama prove his natural-born citizenship, no proof would ever suffice for the birthers; the only result that would satisfy the suit was for Obama to be permanently excluded from the Office of the president. This theme was consistent throughout the various lawsuits that birthers filed. As

time progressed and birtherism's liberal advocates were replaced by paranoid conservatives, the movement's hatred of Obama became more visceral.

To see the ideas of Africa and Kenya that the birthers espoused it is important consider the rationale they developed to justify their vehement opposition to Obama's presidency. The clearest explanation of this rationale is articulated on www.birthers.org. On a page titled "The Logic of a Natural Born Citizen," the site interprets the constitutional exclusion of individuals who are not natural born citizens from the presidency thus,

To understand whom the future Chief Justice John Jay wanted to exclude from being Commander in Chief we need to examine the definition of Foreigner. Using the three most authoritative dictionaries, we can see who should be excluded and for what reason. We can then start to arrive at a definition of a "natural born citizen," that meets this requirement.

MerriamWebster Dictionary [*sic*] - "a person belonging to or owing allegiance to a foreign country."

Oxford English Dictionary [*sic*] - "One who is a subject of another country than that in which he resides. A resident foreign in origin and not naturalized, whose allegiance is thus due to a foreign state."

Blacks Law Dictionary [*sic*] - "A person who is not a citizen or subject of the state or country in which mention is made, or any one owing allegiance to a foreign state or sovereign"

What all of these definitions have in common with the word citizen is allegiance. The target of the allegiance is different between a foreigner and a citizen. Since the reason for this prohibition of the admission of Foreigners into the office of Commander in Chief, is to

prevent the military from being used by non-American powers against the Republic, Jay recommended and the framers agreed that this person must have a natural allegiance that is total and absolute to the Nation and to no other nation or potentate.²²

Through a meticulously detailed analysis, the page goes on to develop a biologically deterministic argument for the different sources of loyalty and allegiance to the United States. In short, the birthers base their rejection of Obama on the idea that birth to two American citizen parents is the best guarantor that a president will not split his or her loyalties between the U.S. and other countries. For the birthers, because Obama lacks this essential biographical datum, he can never have “total and absolute” allegiance to the United States despite his professions of patriotism and his service to the country. In this view, through the ineluctable stroke of conception, Obama was forever contaminated by his father’s Kenyan blood; he could never be the *right kind* of American they saw fit for the presidency. Their metonymical reading of Obama had reached its end prematurely: it did not aspire toward the balance and inclusivism brought by ironic reflexivity. In the birther’s biological determinism, Obama had obligations to Kenya that nullified his exclusive commitment to the United States.

The classic birther view of Kenya emerges in the first anti-Obama book prominent birther Jerome Corsi published in 2008.²³ The views Corsi developed in his book were undoubtedly chastened by ethnonationalism, a term used to denote the anti-inclusive idea that in many countries around the world, people’s commitments to tribe or ethnicity often trump their fidelity to nation. Popularized by Catholic University historian Jerry Muller, ethnonationalism caught on among hardline conservatives like Corsi’s employer at WorldNetDaily, Joseph Farah and others like Pat Buchanan. In an article that appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in the Spring of 2008, Muller juxtaposed the relative absence of dominant ethnic divisions in the American body politic to the prominence of

ethnic sentiment in other countries. After an extensive review of the histories of both America and Europe in which he traced the influence of ethnicity, Muller concluded that ethnonationalism “is a crucial source of both solidarity and enmity, and in one form or another, it will remain for many generations to come.”²⁴ That conclusion figured right into the deterministic logic of birther’s objections to Obama and framed Corsi’s explanation of Obama’s connection to Kenyan politics: they in short believed Obama’s tribal commitments to his father’s native Luo could not be dissolved enough to allow him to be president.

The chapter Corsi devotes to discussing Kenya in his book begins with Obama’s stop in Kenya during the congressional trip which I discussed in the preceding chapter. Isolating the Kenyan portion from the rest of the African tour, Corsi portrays the trip as focused on affecting Kenyan politics: “Obama’s 2006 trip to Kenya evidenced his continued ties to Raila Odinga, a fellow Luo tribesman, who was running for president of Kenya as a Muslim sympathizer with well-known communist political roots.”²⁵ This sentence primes the reader with the platitudes of how Corsi understood Kenya and how it is connected to Barack Obama. Following Muller’s ethnonationalism thesis, Corsi believed that tribal affiliation was both the organizing principle of life in Kenya and the real reason behind Obama’s 2006 trip. Given that Obama and Odinga are “fellow Luo tribesman,” Corsi reasoned Obama strategically planned the trip to throw the weight of his standing as a U.S. Senator behind Odinga’s bid for the Kenyan presidency. For Corsi, by backing the opposition figure from the smaller of Kenya’s two main tribes, Obama positioned himself as a kingmaker in Kenyan politics. This despite the fact that on at least two occasions on the trip, Obama explicitly told the adoring crowds that he had come not as a Kenyan, but as a representative of the United States Government.²⁶

Rather than recourse to ambition as the impetus behind Obama's entry into Kenya's politics, Corsi develops his own ethnonationalistic thesis that he traces across three generations: for him, Obama's intervention was induced by filial and tribal obligation. Corsi begins by establishing the history of Kenyan liberation as dominated by the efforts of influential personalities from Kenya's two biggest tribes, the Kikuyu and Luo. From the Luo, Corsi identifies Tom Mboya and Odinga Odinga as pioneers who worked together with Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, to found the Kenya African National Union (KANU) which led Black agitation for independence in Kenya. Among the Luo characters, Corsi takes a particular liking to Mboya. The reader finds out for example that though Mboya is remembered as a Luo, he was born among a third tribe—the Kamba. This fact, in Corsi's biologically grounded understanding of allegiance, broadened Mboya's loyalties beyond the Luo. Mboya therefore emerges in the mold of what Muller identified as a civic nationalist, that is, one committed to a cosmopolitan not ethnic brand of nationalism: he was "Kenyan first."²⁷ Not only is Mboya presented as a civic nationalist; he is also shown to be the only Luo figure who shared Jomo Kenyatta's vision for an American-style capitalist democracy after Kenya won independence. Odinga by contrast, favored a socialist model. Corsi notes that this difference stoked tension between Mboya and Odinga Odinga from the get-go. While Mboya was a capitalist and a man of the nation, Odinga was a communist sympathizer and a "tribe man."

After independence in 1964 Kenyatta became president and Odinga was appointed vice-president. However, because of his communist sympathies, by 1966 Odinga was deposed from the vice-presidency resulting in him leaving KANU and starting his own opposition party. Mboya was soon expelled from government and eventually assassinated leaving power in the hands of a cabal of Kikuyu's. Shortly after Mboya's death, the government career of Obama senior began the downward spiral that led to his death as well. In Corsi's ethnonationalist view, politics in the fledgling Kenyan republic were dominated by tensions between competing tribal and ideological

visions. In this simplistic gloss, Kenyatta and the Kikuyus outflanked the two Luo factions leaving it up to subsequent generations of Luo's to settle the score.

Against this background, Corsi establishes Barack Obama and Raila Odinga as poised to avenge their late fathers' grievances. Odinga on the one hand was the son of the aggrieved Odinga Odinga who had been ousted from government by Kenyatta, and Obama was the son of Barack Obama senior who had died a pauper after Kikuyu nepotism had cost him his lucrative government job. "Senator Barack Obama" Corsi notes, "came full circle with his father's past by openly supporting Raila Odinga during his visit to Africa in 2006. He took up his father's battle with Kenyatta and joined forces with most extreme Luo in Kenyan politics."²⁸ In Corsi's eyes, both Obama and Odinga are metonymies for tribal and political dynamics already in play well before either of them was born. "By supporting Odinga," insists Corsi, "Obama entered a four-decades long political conflict between Jomo Kenyatta and Tom Mboya that had destroyed [Obama's] father's career."²⁹ Despite Obama's American citizenship and that he grew up with little to no awareness of Kenyan politics, Corsi believes Obama could not have avoided the obligation he owed to his father's legacy and tribe. This is what the birthers feared most about Obama: for them, Obama was bound inextricably to an ethnic politics outside the pale of mainstream American society because of his blood regardless of his protestations of having a White middle class upbringing. They only saw Obama was a metonymy for ethnonationalism; they had little reckoning for the how he could be contributory to the tapestry of American culture.

The Kenya of Corsi's imagination is an ethnonation. It was a country where tribal identity was the most fundamental distinction. However, Corsi's view was remiss on two points. First, his discourse on Kenya was insufficiently ironic: he overlooked the intersectional nature of Kenyan identity. He failed to realize that the tribal factor that he parochially focused on was not the only

determinant of Kenyan identity and politics. As Vinston Burton and Rogers Winsor explain, “ethnic affiliation is still extremely important particularly to rural Kenyans, but, in modern society, one’s affiliation is also determined by sex, age, clan, occupation, family status, education, and religion.”³⁰ There was no reason to parochially assume that the strings of tribal affiliation were the only ones tugging at the protagonists of the historical account Corsi develops. They could have been responding to a variety of alternative stimuli.

Second, by apotheosizing tribe, Corsi loses sight of the contingency of cultural identity which leads him to overstate the immutability of the tribal concept in Kenyan. In reality, the salience of tribal identity in Kenyan politics has changed over time. It is therefore not easy to defend the claims about the importance of tribe over a period as long as 50 years as Corsi attempts to do.³¹ Had Corsi read Benedict Anderson’s book to which Muller’s article refers, he would have known that as immutable as tribal or cultural distinctions may at times appear, they remain “imagined communities,” which still have an ephemeral quality to them.³² Over time, tribal identities and people’s investment in them wax and wane. The mistake that birthers like Corsi made in reading Obama’s connection to Africa was in concluding their assessments of him as metonymy without exploring ironic dimensions of his identity: they only assumed that he had an irrevocable obligation to his father’s Luo legacy. The certainty of such an obligation has certainly lessened by the changing dynamics of the tribal factor in Kenya and the fact that Obama grew up without much knowledge of or affinity for his father’s Luo tribe.

In the birthers’ view, Obama’s connection to Kenya was only metonymical. He represented a place that was ethnonationalist, and because he was implicated in internal dynamics of Kenyan politics, Obama could not simultaneously be anything more. He was therefore not the type of individual who could possess the indubitable commitment and loyalty of the caliber birthers wanted

in an American president. This in turn implies that Obama's loyalty to the United States was not above reproach. He could not elude the tribal obligation even though he grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia—far removed from Kenyan politics in Corsi's Kenya. Corsi put it best when he wrote,

If Obama does win the presidency in 2008, he will be the first president in our history to have an extended family in another country [...] What personal ties to the White House will come from Kenya? If Obama wins the presidency, Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga will correctly perceive that for the first time ever a fellow Luo tribesman is running the United States of America.³³

That is the core belief that drove birther opposition to Obama, at least according to their discourse. In a direct antithesis to Obama's inclusive American Dream, birthers did not want a president who was susceptible to split loyalties. For them, a president's loyalty had to be pure, there was no room for ironic equanimity.

Believing that Obama remains steeped in the political and cultural politics of a people and a place he did not see until his late twenties as birthers did was just as unreasonable as believing that the Kikuyu and Luo identities and dynamics remained as they were in the 1960s. Yet this is what the birthers believed about Kenya. Unfortunately, this was not the only false idea incorporated into the meaning of Kenya by Obama's opponents. Alongside the tribalism he suggests in Kenya, Corsi hints that there is a link between Luo politics and the most loathed of alternative ideologies in American politics—communism. The Kenya People's Union (KPU) which Odinga Odinga formed upon his ouster from government in 1966 was, Corsi notes, "a truly communist party."³⁴ Corsi also finds the communist streak in Raila Odinga noting that he attended college in communist East Germany, named his first son Fidel (after Fidel Castro), and is leader of a "leftist-socialist political

part that stops short of being openly communist.”³⁵ The point is that Obama by associating with his “fellow Luo” unwittingly supported the communist agenda in Kenya.

Whereas Corsi only speculates on Obama’s tacit support for ideologies that are anathema to mainstream American politics, Dinesh D’Souza, a raging conservative fundamentalist, makes it his mission to cultivate anti-Americanism as the core of Obama’s connection to Africa. In *The Roots of Obama’s Rage*, D’Souza endeavors to show that the dreams Obama inherited from his father were the decrepit tenants of anticolonial creed which made at once him anti-European and anti-American. In anti-colonialism or “the movement of ideas that rallied opposition to European rule” at the end of African colonization D’Souza finds Obama’s key motivating ideology.³⁶ Where in D’Souza’s opinion did Obama encounter anticolonial sentiment, and what affect would it have on his presidential philosophy? D’Souza points to Africa’s colonial history and the Marxist inspired philosophies that Obama’s father encountered as the sources of the younger Obama’s anticolonial leanings. As for how Obama’s anticolonialism affects his presidential opinion, D’Souza is not coy. For him, Obama is “the last Anti-Colonial,” the only one left obsessing over the outdated fight against colonialism even as the rest of the world embraces globalization.³⁷ D’Souza’s charge here is at once stunningly simple and utterly incomprehensible: he believes that just as the anticolonialism of Obama’s father had been directed toward the European Empire which was the dominant world power of the day, Obama’s anticolonialism pits him against the nation he leads.

While there is plenty of evidence that confounds D’Souza’s sensationalist drivel, my concern is with how he presents Africa. For D’Souza, Obama is a metonymy not for Kenya’s ethnonationalism as with Corsi, but for Africa’s putative anticolonial and anti-American sentiment. In D’Souza’s view, the dreams that inspired Obama’s father—dreams which were passed onto the younger Obama—came from Africa’s “misguided response” to the tragedy of colonialism. In

contemporary Africa, D'Souza finds the cautionary tale that chastises against the socialist anticolonial aspirations bequeathed to Obama by his father.³⁸ Africa today, D'Souza stereotypically observes, is crippled by "a lethal combination of poverty, repression, civil war, and AIDS."³⁹ Just as the birthers reduced the entirety of Kenyan life to tribal dynamics in Obama, D'Souza similarly makes anti-colonialism the end all of twenty-first century African life that Obama tragically represents. For D'Souza as for Corsi and the rest of the birthers, metonymy is clearly the dominant trope figuring their understanding of Obama's African roots. Their symbolic representations of the American Dream are, in short, unbalanced because they do that their views alone do not represent the full spectrum of American society. Obama by contrast, begins with himself as both a metonymy and synecdoche of the American Dream. His symbol system points towards irony and inclusivism and thus remains both distinct and open to alternative perceptions.

Obama's African Visions

After winning the U.S. Senate elections in 2004, his closest advisors devised a strategy to "send Obama into the 2007-2008 election cycle in the strongest form possible" which called for him to raise both his personal and political profiles.⁴⁰ Since 2002, Obama had become adept at masterfully deploying his association to Africa in the service of claiming his place in the rarefied air of American national politics. The keynote he delivered at the 2004 Democratic National Convention was just the most celebrated example of how his favorite stump speech incorporated the Kenyan part of his story into his version of the American story. Obama in that speech portrayed himself as a representation of the diversity at the heart of the American Dream.

Instead of beginning the DNC keynote with his father's story as he did in his standard stump speech, in Boston Obama traced his Kenyan origins to his grandfather whom he described as "a cook, a domestic servant," to British settlers.⁴¹ Likewise, Obama also extended the portrait of his

mother he had used in his regular stump speeches by describing her as the metonymy of her parents hardworking Midwestern ethos: “her father worked on oil rigs and farms through most of the depression . . . my grandmother raised her baby and went to work on a bomber assembly line.” Against the disparate realities of the African savannah and the Midwestern prairie experienced by his progenitors, Obama inserted himself as a symbol for the realization of the aspirations shared by his parents and grandparents. In short, he too, was a metonymy of the American Dream. What set the dream Obama embodied and that of his mother apart was that his American Dream, was “a common dream, born of two continents.”⁴²

In the Boston speech, Obama’s odyssey stood as the corporal embodiment of a revised American Dream which was both a testament and challenge to the uniqueness of United States of America. On the one hand, he bore in the creases of skin, and with each milestone he attained, the greatness of America within him. As he said, “in no other country on earth” could a race, culture, religion, country, and continent combining identity as his have been accepted as it was in America.⁴³ For Obama, the miracle of America lay in its ability to absorb and actualize the mutual aspirations of people from as far apart as Kenya and Kansas. On the other hand, the rhetorical union between Kenya and the United States symbolized in Obama also functioned as a challenge to those Americans who had fallen victim to parochialism. As a metonymy of the integration of the cultures and places his parents came from, Obama urged Americans to recall that Americans “pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family.”⁴⁴ As inspiring as his biography had been, Obama’s life was just a part of the broader American narrative: “I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all those who came before me.” Put differently, the African experiences of Obama’s family were irreducible from his version of the American Dream. Without them, the rhetorical power of the dream narrative Obama developed would have been significantly undermined. In Boston, therefore, Obama presented the

uniqueness of his own story as a representative anecdote for an inclusive national vision which he believed to be at the core of the American experience. In tropological terms, the metonymy in Obama pointed towards and resolved in ironic understanding of the American Dream. This he called the audacity of hope.

In several other campaign speeches Obama would turn to a synecdochic logic to link his father's Kenyan roots to the mainstream American experience, and articulate Kenya and Africa as parts of his presidential politics. This was the case when, barely a month after he entered the primary contest, Obama spoke in Selma, Alabama. The occasion was the forty-second annual commemoration of "Bloody Sunday" and both Obama and Hilary Clinton descended on Selma. The commemoration attracted significant media attention because it was the first direct clash between Obama and Clinton ahead of the 2008 primaries. At the time, Clinton was not only the prohibitive favorite to win the Democratic nomination; she was also expected to hold onto the majority of the African-American vote in the primaries due to her husband's longstanding rapport with prominent leaders in the Black community.⁴⁵ Obama on the other hand, came to Selma needing to assert both his Civil Rights bona fides and his legitimacy as a Black candidate given that he had not cut his teeth the conventional way most Black politicians who had come before him had done, that is, through the ranks of the Civil Rights movement. Selma was a big moment for Obama's efforts to quell any uncertainties the African-American community might have had about him.

To both differentiate himself from Clinton and position himself an appropriate heir to the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, Obama's speech at Brown Chapel, A.M.E. turned to the prophetic persona of Joshua in the Jewish biblical narrative. In Selma, Obama focused on what he named the "Joshua Generation," a generation of which Reverend Otis Moss Jr. had declared him a

part. Accepting the elder clergyman's imposition, Obama synched his father and grandfather's experiences under colonialism in Kenya with the horrors African Americans endured under Jim Crow to establish his symbolic lineage. He understood himself as a Joshua not only because of the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement in America, but also because of the oppression his father and grandfather saw in Kenya.

You see my Grandfather was a cook to the British in Kenya. Grew up in a small village and all his life, that's what he was—a cook and a house boy. They called him a house boy. They wouldn't call him by his last name.

Sound familiar? ⁴⁶

This was synecdoche; in Obama's reading, the oppression his forbearers endured Selma and that seen by his grandfather in Kenya were cut out the same racist cloth. The Kenyan experience under colonialism was an important corollary to the dark side of the American narrative. If he had used the 2004 speech to show that Africa and Kenya were connected metonymically by virtue of the aspirations carried in the people from each respective place, Obama in Selma showed that the histories of both places were part of larger history—the history of oppression of people of African descent by Caucasians.

But the tale Obama told in Selma did not end in a pessimistic or synecdochic moment; he also included an upward inflection in his narrative. Against the transatlantic history of Black oppression, Obama cast a similarly intercontinental tale of redemption that began at Selma. Quoting Robert Kennedy, he explained that what had happened in Selma sent “ripples of hope all around the world.” Were it not for the Selma marchers, Obama argued, his parents' union may never have occurred and he would not have been born. He was, therefore, not just a part of the Joshua generation, but a beneficiary of the legacy of the Civil Rights movement. Through that double

synecdoche Selma became a figurative home for Obama; “Don’t tell me I’m not coming home to Selma, Alabama.” Just as his first Kenyan sojourn had been a homecoming to a land of strangers, Obama’s trip to Alabama brought him to the progenitors of his legacy.

In Selma, therefore, Obama’s references to Kenya and Africa established African life as parallel and connected, not opposite and detached from the American saga. By configuring his doubled legacy of racial oppression he built a synecdoche connecting Africa and America. Obama was able to map the strands of his life story from both sides of the Atlantic ironically together for an audience that had been previously unfamiliar with the details of his life. That strategy, of addressing himself as the embodiment of mutuality between seemingly disparate realities was not just a ploy to bring fidelity to Obama’s biography. As Remnick notes, it was an important precursor to “the language and distinctiveness of his campaign.”⁴⁷ Otherwise put, one signature of Obama’s campaign was an ironic American Exceptionalism which symbolically unified Africa and America through Obama’s metonymy and synecdoche.

With his firm belief in the connection of the Kenyan reality to American life, Obama fittingly remained in touch with political developments in Kenya even as the stakes in the Democratic primaries mounted as the race entered its most serious phase. On December 27, 2007, just six days prior to Iowa’s first-in-the-nation caucus, Kenyans voted in a general election. Allegations of vote rigging leveled against Mwai Kibaki’s incumbent administration led to incidents of violence raising fears that Kenya might descend into civil war. Despite fending off Clinton’s attacks on his ability to command respect on world stage and a late surge in Iowa by John Edwards, behind the scenes Obama “immersed himself in a unique international crisis, in real time, doing something that most presidential candidates can only dream of: a personal, presidential-style intervention in foreign affairs.”⁴⁸ Like he would do during the general election when the U.S.

economy imploded, Obama proved capable of simultaneously handling multiple demands on his attention as he juggled the grueling campaign schedule in the final days before an important primary with daily conversations with State Department personnel, phone calls to Raila Odinga, Kenya's opposition leader, radio interviews, and writing an editorial column on Kenya's controversial elections for a Kenyan newspaper.⁴⁹ Obama was simply acting on his conviction that African politics was not an impossible remove from the currents in American democracy.

Obama's interest in the Kenyan crisis was not just about his extended family. The crisis was for him a crucial moment in the global struggle for democracy and good governance. As he told the *New York Times*' Jeff Zeleny, "Despite irregularities in the vote tabulation, now is not the time to throw out that strong democracy."⁵⁰ After his victory in Iowa, Obama tried unsuccessfully to draw attention to Kenya's elections with members of the media in South Carolina. Predictably, news reporters, who were more interested in the hijinks drama of Clinton's surprising defeat in Iowa and win in the New Hampshire, were unwilling to talk about anything other than the U.S. election even if Obama brought it up.

Still, Obama would not back away from speaking about how events in Africa were part of both his personal story and the American narrative even when his campaign was on the brink of collapse as he did when he confronted the Jeremiah Wright controversy in the Spring of 2008. To appreciate my point here, you must recall that though Obama's race speech was not only an endeavor in crisis management; the speech also fulfilled an historical function in the tradition of the best African-American speeches: "African-American history is distinguished in no small part, by a history of African-American rhetoric—speeches given at essential moments."⁵¹ Obama's race speech was one such rhetorical soundtrack for a pivotal moment in the history of race relations. Not only did Obama confront the problem of what he called "cynical politics," he also used the

moment to inscribe the African backstory into that particular moment in American history that his speech described.

Shortly after taking the podium at Constitution Hall in Philadelphia, Obama donned the persona of a cynic sage. In short, he was convinced that the antidote to the nation's twenty-first century struggles with race was a rediscovery of the principle of constant refinement. Therefore, the speech's opening lines quoted the constitution; "We the people in order to form a more perfect union." By returning to a seminal moment in American history, Obama retrieved the foundational principle that his speech (and eventually his campaign) would issue to the Joshua generation. The republic's inception was for him both a covenant and call to "continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America." The constitution in this account marked a beginning, not a culminating moment in the search for a more perfect union. Obama realized that "words on parchment would not be enough" to perfect the union. For him, perfection would result only from the cumulative efforts of generations of Americans. The founders had started the experiment, and succeeding generations had continued it by ending slavery and extending franchise to women and persons of color. It was now up to the Joshua generation to come to the ironic realization that "we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together."

Here, Obama turned to his biography for proof. "This belief," he said, "comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own American story." That story, he would continue, began with his parents, "a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas."⁵² Just as he had done in the 2004 convention keynote, in the so-called race speech, Obama used metonymy as figuring trope for his African background's connection to his American story. In Boston, Obama had spoken of his interracial-intercultural

identity as a metonymy for American diversity, he was a corporeal manifestation of the success of the American experiment; in Philadelphia, embodied the antidote to the problem of race.

Even though he did not say much else about his fatherland, his discourse suggested that to him, the important thing was not the choice between Kenya and Kansas as places of his origin, but the realization that no sense of his identity would be complete without both places. This realization was the core of Obama's ironic sense of the American Dream. Similarly, Obama projected himself as the corporal nexus of third world poverty and prestige of an Ivy League education when he spoke of growing up in Indonesia and attending prestigious schools in Hawaii, California, New York, and Boston. Because his life story a metonymy for the America Obama believed in his Kenyan background led to a more ironic sense of what it means to be an American. In addition to knowing that his cosmopolitan story would not have been possible in any other country but America, Obama was here introducing an important foil to the tendency Americans' have to "imagine themselves as a morally elevated people set apart from the rest of the world and living in a land of opportunity that is the envy of and aspiration of humankind."⁵³ Arguing as he did that his American identity embodied both Kenya and Kansas, proved Obama an adherent of democratic exceptionalism, that attitude that "America was still the world's last and best hope for promoting freedom and justice over tyranny and despair, but it would operate on the world stage with a democratic attitude of interdependence."⁵⁴

When Obama included details of African lineage, one could say, he did so to establish the preeminence of irony as a *sine qua non* in a truly democratic America. As Richard Rorty, whom James Kloppenburg tells us is one of Obama's influences, observes, "to see one's language, one's conscience, one's morality and one's highest hopes as contingent products, as literalizations of what once were accidentally produced metaphors, is to adopt a self-identity which suits one for

citizenship in an ideally liberal state.”⁵⁵ Each time Obama referred to the Kenyan and African aspects of his biography, it was not just a matter of political decorum but a way of reimagining the very meaning of American society and its ideals. By deploying his African background as a synecdoche, metonymy, or irony on the ideals of American society, Obama reconfigured America’s relationship with Kenya in particular, and Africa more broadly. In Obama’s cosmopolitan vision, the colonial world in which his father and grandfather had experienced in Kenya was no longer impossibly remote from American democracy. Rather, both realities were dialectically tied together in a broader human narrative in the mode of irony. This is the stuff of not only a well rounded rhetorical system, but also of a humanitarian worldview. His detractors’ invocations of Kenya and Africa did not come anywhere near this standard.

Conclusion

By focusing on the tropology of campaign rhetoric as I have done here, I show that when Obama and his opponents evoked Kenya and Africa, they were doing different things even though they may have used a similar vocabulary. For his part, while Obama embraced the familiar idiom of the American Dream he did not just blindly accept the conventional understanding of the dream. As Robert Rowland and John M. Jones found, Obama “recast” the dream, making it amenable his own purposes. My analysis here points out that by figuring his version of the American dream through irony, Obama recast the dream in another important way, that is by placing cultural diversity and integration at its core. By balancing metonymy, synecdoche and irony in his reading of the American Dream, Obama developed a well rounded representation of America’s most compelling rhetorical visions. In so doing, he also invoked Africa at the very center of American politics bridging the physical distance between Kenya and the United States. Working only through

metonymy Obama's opponents, by contrast, used their speculations on Africa to articulate a much narrower and exclusive vision of America. Theirs resulted in an unbalanced symbol system. With Obama in the White House, it remains to be seen how well he has held to his ecumenical version of the American Dream.

¹ Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power*: 225.

² Remnick, *The bridge : the life and rise of Barack Obama*: 398.

³ Kenneth Burke, *A grammar of motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). 503-17; Peter Ramus, "Arguments in Rhetoric Against Quintilian," in *The rhetorical tradition : readings from classical times to the present*, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001); Giambattista Vico, *New science : principles of the new science concerning the common nature of nations* (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1999). 159-62.

⁴ David Tell, "Burke's Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in "Four Master Tropes"," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2004): 34.

⁵ Burke, *A grammar of motives*: 503.

⁶ Hayden V. White, *Tropics of discourse* (Baltimore (Md.); London: Johns Hopkins university press, 1992). 72-3.

⁷ Burke, *A grammar of motives*: 503.

⁸ Burke, *Language as symbolic action : essays on life, literature, and method*: 5.

⁹ Tell, "Burke's Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in "Four Master Tropes"," 47.

¹⁰ Burke, *A grammar of motives*: 513.

¹¹ White, *Tropics of discourse*: 73.

¹² Burke, *A grammar of motives*: 514.

¹³ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward history* (New York: The New republic, 1937). 42.

¹⁴ Ben Smith and Byron Tau, "Birtherism: Where it all began,"

<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/53563.html>.

¹⁵ See for example "Is Barack Obama a natural-born citizen of the U.S.?",

<http://www.snopes.com/politics/obama/citizen.asp>; "Barack Obama and the Kenya Connection,"

<http://www.snopes.com/politics/obama/kenya.asp>.

¹⁶ *Berg v. Obama et al*, Berg, Philip J Complaint for declaratory and injunctive relief preliminary statement(2008).

¹⁷ "Is Barack Obama a natural-born citizen of the U.S.?",

¹⁸ *Berg v. Obama et al*(2008); John Wright, *The Obama haters : behind the right-wing campaign of lies, innuendo, and racism* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011). 39-40.

¹⁹ Errol Louis, "The birth of a nutty nation," *Daily News*, July 23 2009; Eugene Robinson, "The Berserk 'Birthers'," *The Washington Post*, August 4 2009; Robert Farley, "Alleged Obama birth certificate from Kenya is a hoax," *St. Petersburg Times*, August 21s 2009.

²⁰ Smith and Tau, "Birtherism: Where it all began".

²¹ Wright, *The Obama haters : behind the right-wing campaign of lies, innuendo, and racism*: 41.

²² birthers.org, "The Logic of a Natuaral Born Citizen," <http://birthers.org/misc/logic.htm>.

²³ Jerome R. Corsi, *The Obama nation : leftist politics and the cult of personality* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2008).

²⁴ Jerry Z. Muller, "Us and Them: The Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2008): 35.

²⁵ Corsi, *The Obama nation : leftist politics and the cult of personality*: 93.

²⁶ Hercules, "Senator Obama Goes to Africa."

²⁷ Corsi, *The Obama nation : leftist politics and the cult of personality*: 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁰ Smith and Tau, "Birtherism: Where it all began" 17.

³¹ See for example Jean-Fran  ois Bayart, *The illusion of cultural identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Johannes Fabian, "Missions and the Colonization of African Languages: Developments in the Former Belgian Congo,"

Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines 17, no. 2 (1983); Leroy Vail, *The Creation of tribalism in Southern Africa* (London; Berkeley: Currey ; University of California Press, 1989); J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).

³² Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined communities : reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2006).

³³ Corsi, *The Obama nation : leftist politics and the cult of personality*: 113.

³⁴ Ibid., 100.

³⁵ Ibid., 103.

³⁶ Dinesh D'Souza, *The roots of Obama's rage* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Pub., 2010). 30.

³⁷ Ibid., 215.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 211l.

⁴⁰ Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power*: 305.

⁴¹ Obama, "Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention".

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Remnick, *The bridge : the life and rise of Barack Obama*: 3-25.

⁴⁶ Barack Obama, "Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration,"

http://www.barackobama.com/2007/03/04/selma_voting_rights_march_comm.php.

⁴⁷ Remnick, *The bridge : the life and rise of Barack Obama*: 3.

⁴⁸ Richard Wolffe, *Renegade : the making of a president* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009). 247.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 247-9.

⁵⁰ Jeff Zeleny, "Obama seeks Kenya Calm," *The New York Times*, January 9 2008.

⁵¹ Remnick, *The bridge : the life and rise of Barack Obama*: 522.

⁵² Barack Obama, "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: 'A more perfect union',"

http://www.barackobama.com/2008/03/18/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_53.php.

⁵³ Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom: Transacting the Mythos of Change in the 2008 Presidential Campaign," 361.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). 61.

CHAPTER IV: Africa in American Wars

On February 14, 2008, a day before he left on the second Africa trip of his presidency, George W. Bush proudly proclaimed that his administration had “fundamentally altered” American policy toward Africa. “We are treating African leaders as partners,” Bush explained, adding that his administration had abandoned the “paternalistic notion that treats African nations as charity cases.”¹ In his speech, Bush outlined three areas his administration had focused on during his term in office to help Africans actualize their partnership potential: economic development, eradication of poverty and disease, and the promotion of peace. Four years later, Barack Obama, announced his own policy for Africa in a document titled “The U.S. Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa.”² Echoing Bush, Obama explained that he believed that “Africa and its people are partners with America in creating a future we want for all of our children.”³ He too had a strategic vision for Africa anchored in “four pillars”—strengthening democracy, economic growth, advancing peace and security, and development. Obama in 2012 may as well have been George W. Bush in 2008: both presidents shared the view that the future for African policy revolved around security, democracy, and development.

The concordance that Bush and Obama struck on Africa policy was surprising because until that point, Obama had been publically critical of Bush’s policies abroad. In 2002, in what he called his “best-written and most courageous speech”—the now famous “dumb wars” speech—Obama explicitly accused the Bush administration of raising the profile of the Iraq war to cover their failures both at home and abroad.⁴ During his campaign for the White House, Obama often spoke of his intention to “reboot” America’s image abroad, and to “renew” America’s leadership in the world.⁵ In a 2007 article for *Foreign Affairs*, Obama criticized the Bush Administration for relying on “conventional thinking of the past, largely viewing problems as state-based and principally amenable

to military solutions.”⁶ And after he had won presidency, Obama in his inaugural promised “a new way forward”⁷ in American foreign policy.

In Africa policy, the differences between Bush and Obama’s foreign doctrines produced contrasting visions of the continent, which in turn affected how each administration envisioned partnership with African nations. Though Bush claimed to have parted new waters in U.S.-Africa policy, he in fact extended into the twenty-first century the tradition in American Africa policy of viewing African nations largely through the lens of war. Bush in his discourse, saw Africa primarily as a battleground in the larger struggle to safeguard the global frontier from the threat of terrorism. It was Obama who, by articulating his commitments to democracy and egalitarianism to his Africa policy, signaled beyond the conventional wisdom in American policy in Africa. Thus even though Bush and Obama spoke of partnership in their Africa policy statements, they were not speaking about the same kinds of partnerships.

Only rhetorical theory allows one to sift the differences between how Bush and Obama understood American partnership with Africa to foreground their respective commitments. Therefore, I return to the Aristotelian corpus to borrow another of his tools for the analysis of argument. This time, I turn to stasis theory to demonstrate that when viewed discursively, U.S. relations with Africa have historically lacked a consistent focus on matters of mutual concern. As a result of the absence of consistent terms upon which the relationship between the U.S. and African nations could be sustained, America-Africa relations have fluctuated sporadically through the years. As I show below, substantive diplomatic contact between the U.S. and Africa has mostly been contingent upon what parochial American interests dictate. Thus by reading Bush and Obama’s Africa policy through the lens of Aristotle’s notion of stasis, it becomes clear that it was Obama, not

Bush who broke with the tradition in U.S.-Africa policy. I begin by discussing stasis theory before turning to the African visions conveyed in the policy discourses of Obama and Bush.

Stasis and Foreign Relations

Drawing from his studies on the physics of motion, Aristotle showed stasis to be the pivot of an argument or the conceptual confluence of any thesis and antithesis.⁸ Stasis, according Aristotle, is a condition of argument proper because it exists at the point around which two opposing movements of thought collide and become debatable. For Aristotle, stasis was the *meson* or the “event which must necessarily occur in-between opposite movements of one subject.”⁹ As a mid-point, the point of stasis is salient to all arguments. It identifies that which parties in a debate agree to disagree on. Stasis, to render things differently, is the all-encompassing point of argument; it encompasses the inventive possibilities for all arguments just as *topoi* are the inventive sources of persuasive appeals. In other words, stasis describes the condition in arguments that simultaneously makes argument possible and places limits on how an argument can develop. Without stasis no meaningful debate can exist.

Stasis not only makes argument possible and places limits on the inventive possibilities therein; it also negates the finality of any one position in an argument by functioning as a counterpoint to any given point in an argument. Stasis maintains the possibility of argument by keeping alternative positions in view. Thus to relate stasis to the popular theories of rhetoric as persuasion, one might say that stasis takes the place in argument that contingency occupies in rhetoric. Like contingency, stasis opens up possibilities that envelope both thesis and antithesis. Without a mid-point acting as an anchor for opposing arguments, parties in an argument likely speak past each other, or single viewpoint becomes so dominant that instead of a healthy debate occurring, a singular orthodoxy results. International relations function similarly; without issues of mutual

concern incentivizing nations to sustain good relations with the other countries, the interests of a single powerful country easily come to dominate. Stated differently, the absence of explicitly recognized points of stasis in international relations raises the possibility of global consensus by dictates of the more powerful countries. Stasis theory therefore creates an opening for a rhetorical evaluation of U.S.-Africa relations that turns on the structural quality of the relations themselves.

A Brief History of U.S.-Africa relations

Two forces through the years have driven the relationship between the United States and the Africa: commerce and national security. It was the commercial impetus that led to the plunder of Africa's most vital resource when millions of African men, women, and children were enslaved for sale to American traders during the first three centuries of American-African relations. Likewise, the drive to secure American capitalist enterprise abroad led to the formation of the American navy a short while after the birth of the American republic. That navy was first deployed to the waters on Africa's north coast in what came to be known as the Barbary Wars.

From these ostentatious beginnings, the history of U.S.-Africa relations has largely been an account of American actions on and around continental Africa intended to advance U.S. interests. In the process, many African countries have been reduced to the status of silent and pliable partners in U.S.-Africa policy. This reality is born out in United States' political and economic interventions across the continent. After the collapse of slavery in the United States in the 1860s, the U.S. took a *laissez faire* stance towards African subjugation during the height of European colonialism of Africa between the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. By the 1960s, when much of Africa began to emerge from the throes of colonialism, the U.S. was entangled in the Cold War. As a result, U.S. engagement in Africa during the Cold War was "an inconsistent crisis-to-crisis policy, with frequent strategic shifts, with containing the communist influence as the only constant."¹⁰ During this period,

African nations were reduced to pawns and stepping stones in the battle between the competing ideologies from the West and East for greater influence around the world.

After the Cold War ended, Africa policy architects in Washington could no longer rely on anti-U.S.S.R rhetoric to guide the American mission in Africa. American Africa policy therefore went without an overall direction in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. In the early 1990s, Washington's Africa policy aggressively supported the market liberalization philosophy advocated by Bretton Woods Institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The U.S.'s backing of the IMF's Economic Structural Adjustment (ESAP) initiative was "not particularly interested in the thoughts of its client countries on such topics as development strategy and fiscal austerity."¹¹ At the same time, Washington ardently embraced a pro-democracy stance by insisting on the establishment of American-style political structures as a precondition for many of its dealings with African countries. Therefore during the 1990s, U.S.-Africa policy followed the dual purposes of Washington Consensus economic ideas, and made aid to Africa contingent upon the pursuit of democracy. Throughout these years, Africa functioned as a means for the attainment of American goals and interests.

Africa in George W. Bush's Prophetic Dualism

Regardless of Bush's best intentions, when it came to Africa, the policy he advocated did not establish a mutual basis on which African countries could relate to the U.S. Like many American presidents before him, Bush viewed official relations with Africa as a diplomatic chore—they were an afterthought, necessary only when strategic interests compelled. In this regard, Bush's perceptions were nothing new; since 1958, when the Bureau of African Affairs was created, conventional wisdom within U.S. diplomatic policy apparatus was to behave toward Africa as if it were the pariah of world politics. To be certain, Africa's needs have from time to time stirred the

sympathies of the world. What has not emerged is a U.S. Africa policy that consistently prioritizes on the interests of African nations.

It is true that Bush was able to make Africa the one foreign policy frontier on which he had relatively uncontroversial success. As Cornell University Government scholar Nicolas Van de Walle noted, “Bush garnered congratulations for his Africa policy, both from the left, where observers such a pop stars Bono and Bob Geldoff somewhat reluctantly praised his administration, and more enthusiastically from his own camp, for which Africa policy constituted one of his most brilliant successes.”¹² According to Jennifer Cooke and Stephen Morrison, the plaudits were deserved because U.S.-Africa policy under Bush underwent “a dramatic transformation characterized by an expansion of U.S. interests, a high-level diplomatic push on Sudan, unprecedented resource flows, and the establishment of several historic initiatives.”¹³ Admirers of Bush’s Africa policy point to his doubling of U.S. aid to sub-Saharan Africa and the establishment of several high profile initiatives including the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in 2006, and the creation of the U.S. Army’s first ever dedicated command for Africa, the Africa Command (AFRICOM) as evidence of his elevation of Africa on the American agenda.

Still, George W. Bush’s incrementalism in Africa maintained, rather than disrupted, the unilateral legacy of American policy in Africa. As his predecessors Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and American presidents dating back to the mid-twentieth century had done, Bush only took Africa seriously after a crisis that threatened American values and interests.¹⁴ Rupert Emerson had it best when he described Africa’s standing in American foreign policy thus,

Europe is always with us; Asia and South America swim in and out of the center of our consciousness as the prevailing tides of time dictate. Africa, rising and falling in American

awareness, has never rivaled the other continents in its ability to capture our interest, and it barely does so now. In the last years, however, it has shot ahead spectacularly¹⁵

Though Emerson wrote these words some 49 years ago, they still ring true in 2012. Africa as a region still has yet to attain the status and significance that other regions of the world enjoy in American foreign policy. In the past, U.S. involvement in Africa has ebbed and flowed as America's parochial interests have changed. Many times, African nations have been forced to assume the role of junior if not docile partners in their interactions with the Washington. Bush's Africa policy only intensified and magnified this reality; it did not change the U.S.'s orientation to Africa. Here is how he explained his administration's orientation to Africa,

America's approach to Africa stems from both our ideals and our interests. We believe that every human life is precious. We believe that our brothers and sisters in Africa have dignity and value, because they bear the mark of our Creator. We believe our spirit is renewed when we help African children and families and thrive. Africa is also increasingly vital to our strategic interests.¹⁶

In Bush's theologically influenced worldview, the U.S. had a dual imperative to act in Africa: to uphold the God-ordained infinite intrinsic value of each individual, and to curb the continent's potential to "produce failed states, foster ideologies of radicalism, spread violence across borders."¹⁷ The latter was simply a euphemism for the signature preoccupation of the Bush presidency, the war on terror.

With the rise of extensive terrorist networks bent on attacking American assets anywhere around the world, "Africa's clear potential to become a breeding ground for new terrorist threats thus landed it a new place on the U.S. foreign policy agenda."¹⁸ On a continent where armed

conflicts were commonplace in pre- and post-independence struggles, and where America's enemies had proved keen to exploit failed states as bases for their attacks on American assets, stabilizing and securing Africa's vulnerable states was a top priority for Bush. After all, in addition to the 2001 attacks in New York City, Pennsylvania, and Washington D.C., terrorist had been implicated in the 1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya, were rumored to be connected to the advent of Piracy off the coast of Somalia, and had played a role in the 2003 bombings in Casablanca, Morocco. Thus Bush had some justification for viewing Africa as an active front in the war on terror.

The rhetoric of the war on terror was not only a catalyst for Bush's interest in Africa, it became a means for him to fuse his *realpolitik* Africa policy with his conservative Christian ideals. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks the Bush administration "*made* terrorism and the global *war* on terrorism, the defining aspect"¹⁹ of the post-9/11 world. Bush administration officials and mainstream media used bellicose language in their discussions of the war as a matter of convention. The war discourse they used solidified through repetitive use of phrases like "war on terror," "clash of civilizations," and "the axis of evil." In the crisis brought by the attacks, George Bush and his allies found the opportunity to define the American *raison d'être* in the twenty-first century: defeating terrorism.²⁰ As Bush explained when he launched the war fear in a speech just days after 9/11, "in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment."²¹

In defining the retaliatory war as both a mission and moment, Bush performed one of the oldest rhetorical maneuvers in the American rhetorical tradition. He seized on a crisis to revise Americans' understanding of the U.S.'s national purpose. To do so, Bush borrowed language from the theological register to imbue his hawkish position about how the country was to respond with a sense of doctrinal gravitas. Missions are divine errands; they are calls to duty from on high. In its

earliest uses, the word mission was central to Trinitarian theology. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, mission defined “the sending into the world of the Son by the Father, or of the Spirit by the Son.” Just as the Son and the Spirit were emissaries of God the Father, in labeling the war a mission Bush cast himself as a prophet and leader in same the order as Jesus, and his war as an extension of the divine mission. In so doing, Bush synthesized his voice with that of God and was able to calmly predict the future of one of America’s darkest episodes: “The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.” Virtually every American president since World War II has evoked a similarly prophetic view of the world as Bush deployed. It not only fuses patriotism to religious piety; more importantly, it sanctions a starkly Manichean view of the world, one which views the world as an evil “them,” and a good “us.” This is what Philip Wander labeled “prophetic dualism.”²²

One of the ideological effects of prophetic dualism that Bush used to undermine the possibility of stasis in U.S.-Africa relations was the silencing of dissent. In prophetic dualism, dissenting voices and those beyond the prophetic consensus are not only viewed as wrong, but as opposed to divine decree. For this reason, Bush could not tolerate differences in opinion from African nations. His PEPFAR and Millenial Challenge Account funds were only disbursed after it had been established that “the aid[would] reinforce good governance, economic freedom and investments in people.”²³ Bush’s prophetic dualism also made it possible for his aggressive militarism and humanitarian efforts to exist side by side in Africa. Bush’s humanitarian initiatives showcased the benefits earned by adherence to the twin gospels of democracy and free markets, and his prosecution of war aggressively displayed the wrath occasioned by straying against the world’s lone superpower. Very little mutuality was involved.

In American public memory, expansions beginning with the westward journey across the Atlantic that landed puritan settlers on Plymouth Rock, have been understood as part of the nation's "errand into the wilderness" to borrow from the title of Perry Miller's work. In fact, the language of missiology Bush used to describe the war on terror lends itself quite well to what can be called a frontier mentality; for what is mission if not "going into all the world"²⁴ to bring the gospel to those have yet to be interpellated? Bush's stated goal of eradicating terrorism from the face of the earth, expanded the frontier to include any place where terrorism could grow. This was the rhetorical justification of Africa's strategic significance for Bush. Notice that the view of Africa as the new frontier for the war on terror was an exclusively American perspective had already been settled; it was not a point of stasis.

In the frontier myth, dominance over the frontier is secured by the crucible of crossing the abyss. This is how Bush understood Africa's predicament. He noted in his speech that,

Africa has also witnessed some of mankind's most shameful chapters – from the evils of the slave trade to the condescension of colonialism. Even the joy of independence – which arrived with such promise – was undermined the corruption, conflict and disease. Just a decade ago, much of Africa seemed to be on the brink of collapse, and much of the world seemed content to let it collapse. Today, that has changed. A new generation of leaders is stepping forward and turning their continent around.²⁵

For Bush, despite the pain, suffering, and loss Africans had endured due to bad governance and a hostile world environment, the continent was on the precipice of glory. Using this dream of a robust African future Bush was able to pursue a meticulously planned agenda in Africa that had little to do with Africa's future.

As a means of curbing the spread of terrorist ideologies, Bush wanted to establish reliable governance infrastructure across Africa especially in troubled nations. This goal became a key foreign policy objective starting in the early 2000s. Bush's paradigm for national security in Africa balanced between "preventative measures in weak states," and "combat operations against clearly defined enemies."²⁶ Under the new paradigm, "the goal," as a career diplomat at the Bureau of African Affairs explained, was "to develop a network of well-governed states capable through responsible sovereignty of protecting themselves and contributing to regional security."²⁷ This was the template for Africa that the George W. Bush administration adopted, refined, and eventually bequeathed to Obama in 2008. Through all of that time, Africans' perspectives were seldom consulted.

To pursue this goal, Bush combined development, diplomacy and defense, ushering in what came to be known as the "3D" strategy.²⁸ The conflation of aid, politics and militarism in Africa only confirmed that for Bush, Africa was a theater of an American war. Nothing better confirms this than Bush's creation of the United State's Army's first dedicated combat command for Africa, the Africa Command (AFRICOM). From its inception, the idea of AFRICOM was conceived of in the stereotypically top-down manner often associated with the bureaucracy of the U.S. army. According to U.S. military's own findings, the formation of AFRICOM was driven in no small part by Donald Rumsfeld's "authoritarian and unilateral manner" and took place without any consultation of African countries.²⁹ Even though Rumsfeld's tenure as Secretary of Defense ended before AFRICOM came into existence, traces of his dictatorial tendencies were still discernible in official discourse about AFRICOM. When Robert Gates, the new Secretary of Defense for example, announced AFRICOM on February 6, 2007, he forthrightly explained that it was a "unified combatant command [...] to oversee security cooperation, building partnership, capability, defense support to nonmilitary missions, and if directed, military operations on the African continent" on

the day he officially launched the command.”³⁰ Though he was attempting to broaden the operational reach of the new command to include partnership building, capacity training and “nonmilitary missions,” Gates did not rule out that the creation of the command was necessitated by the war on terror.

Many African leaders and media commentators complained that AFRICOM was really the Bush administration’s ploy for “establishing access to oil and natural resources; enabling the United States to fight terrorism; and countering China’s growing influence.”³¹ To them, AFRICOM was African in name only; it was all about advancing American economic and military interests. Out of 54 sovereign African nations, only Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, and Liberia supported the newly created command. Liberia was the only country that offered to host AFRICOM’s headquarters on the continent. So AFRICOM was not the beacon of multilateral partnership the Bush administration had tried to make it. Instead, it better symbolized the consolidation of a unilateral U.S. African military strategy. Despite AFRICOM’s failure to inspire a new sense of partnership with Africa, Bush remained convinced his African policy had successfully achieved this goal.

Bush unwittingly revealed that his administration’s partnership with Africa was not based on parity in his 2008 speech. Framing the partnership in terms of an economic covenant Bush explained the U.S.’s role as being “an investor, not a donor.” By claiming the investor label he specified a particular role for the U.S. relative to Africa. Investors are partners that expect something in exchange for what they put into a partnership. In the remainder of the 2008 speech, Bush spoke in rousing language about what it was he wanted from Africa. He wanted an Africa that had vibrant democracies, robust economies, low HIV/AIDS and malaria infection rates, and a lasting peace. In and of themselves, these were respectable aspirations to have for any single nation

state. However, in the post 9/11 context in which Bush spoke, each of those goals were part of the effort to establish an secure the African continent from the threat of terrorism. As he said

We have seen that conditions on the other side of the world can have a direct impact on our own security. We know that if Africa were continue on the old path of decline, it would be more likely to produce failed states, foster ideologies of radicalism, and spread violence across borders. We also know that if Africa grows in freedom, and prosperity, and justice, it's people will choose a better course. People who live in societies based on freedom and justice are more likely to reject the false promise of the extremist ideology.³²

In other words, the security and prosperity of Africa was a means to an end, and not end unto itself for Bush. It was in this regard, that Bush was in closer keeping with the nationalist tendencies of his predecessors than with the new doctrine of new partnership that he claimed. He did not see the value of building relations on the basis of stasis. It is important to note that in Bush's construction, the ideals and interests he identified as bases for his administration's engagement in U.S.-Africa relations were not points of stasis in American relations with Africa. His was a rhetorically implausible formulation of U.S.-Africa relations.

Beyond the war; Barack Obama and the new African partnership

The Africa policy Bush bequeathed to Obama suffered from three specific weaknesses. First, Bush like all his predecessors, failed to articulate a cogent strategy for Africa because his administration did not have a comprehensive administrative structure to integrate his different operations in Africa. Rather, his operations were dispersed across different sites, as Van De Walle reported,

Anti-terrorism and military security cooperation have focused primarily on North Africa, the Sahel, and the Horn region, while PEPFAR's Africa focus has been almost entirely Southern and East Africa. Energy policy, for its part, has focused on the Gulf of Guinea in Central Africa, while AGOA [the African Growth and Opportunity Act passed by Clinton] has primarily benefited Southern Africa, with the exception of Nigeria. Thus, individual African countries have typically built very different relationships with the US, around the policies of specific agencies, and without an overarching logic.³³

Second, the subjugation of development and diplomatic initiatives to military command at AFRICOM blurred the jurisdictions of the three agencies responsible for each area in ways that raised potential for territorial conflicts. For example several, chain-of-command contradictions were written into AFRICOM's structure from the onset. The head of AFRICOM was by law only obligated to follow the commands of the Secretary of Defense. However, as General Ward explained to the Senate Armed Services committee, the commander was only to "consult" with the Secretary of State despite the fact that the latter has precedence over the defense secretary according to the United States constitution. Furthermore, no protocol was laid out for negotiating how AFRICOM's commander would choose which cabinet member to follow should they dissent, as Condoleezza Rice and Donald Rumsfeld did on important matters. The contradictions were not only at the upper echelons of AFRICOM; they also played out in the new command's day-to-day on-the-ground operations. At American embassies all of over Africa for example, the various Ambassadors were heads of mission meaning they had final say on overall activities at their specific embassies. Under the new structure however, military attachés at the embassies would have to choose between the ambassador's civilian commands and those of the army should the two ever contradict. Before AFRICOM, military details at the embassies were exclusively beholden to the army's command structure.

Third, by the time they left, the Bush administration had done little to repair the diplomatic failures of the first Bush and Clinton administrations. American unilateralism in both Somalia and Rwanda remained an affront to African statesmen who preferred multilateral to solutions to the continent's problems. Rather than appeal to African regional blocs like the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the African Union (AU) for support for his banner programs on the continent, Bush chose instead to follow the longstanding American tradition of going it alone or, on occasion speaking directly with specific nations.

As a result, relations between the U.S. and the nations of Africa never reached meaningful stasis. This was the assessment that Barack Obama made of Africa policy in the early days of his presidency. In his early speeches on Africa, Obama began shifting the basis of his policy to Africa from national security to human rights. By turning to the universal grounds offered by humanitarian discourse, Obama fused narrow American interests with broader human concerns thereby establishing a mutually satisfying paradigm from which the U.S. could engage African nations. In seeking better terms for American relations with the peoples of Africa, Obama's discourse displayed an egalitarian impulse that was unfamiliar to the history of the U.S.'s Africa policy. Obama presented his views of Africa policy in the two major speeches he gave on Africa: his Cairo Address of in June, 2009 and his Speech to the Ghanaian Parliament in July, 2009. In his speeches, Obama enjoined his audiences across the African continent to embrace his definition of partnership as a dialectical dance between two or more companions. His speeches projected his vision of both the ideal partnership he sought for America in Africa, and the mechanics of how he saw those relationships ideally functioning. The Cairo and Accra speeches contained elements of both the explanation and enactment of the new partnership.

Obama began his drive for a reset of relations with Africa in his speech in Cairo. As the most anticipated speech of Obama his early presidency, the speech was designed to both explain and model the vision of diplomacy Obama wanted to effect. In Cairo, Obama pronounced an end to Bush's prophetic dualism. Recognizing the potential for unnecessary destruction inherent in the prophetic dualism that guided the Bush administration's foreign policy, Obama in Cairo wanted to shift to a politics of mutuality and progress. He wanted to replace support for arbitrary U.S. interests with support for broader and more egalitarian human concerns as the driving force for American alliances. His was a democratic inflection of American Exceptionalism.³⁴

In the first six paragraphs of his speech, Obama turned to the dialogue metaphor to describe his view of foreign policy. As he explained, "there must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground." He wanted a foreign policy that was based on matters of mutual concern. Here was a rhetorical approach to foreign policy—Obama recognized the importance of stasis or areas of mutual concern to the success of U.S. -Africa relations. However, Obama's search for common ground did not license the erasure or neglect of differences in opinion. For Obama sources of tension were not the despicable harbingers of ungodliness and anti-Americanism that they would have been in Bush's prophetic dualism. As he urged, "we must confront tension squarely." The sources of tensions were essential to Obama's vision of partnership with the African nations. They constituted the points of stasis in the relations. He did not stop at explaining the principle behind the new dialogue he wanted to institute. In the speech's remainder, Obama went on to discuss the seven specific issues that he saw as points of mutual but conflicting concern between Americans and Muslims: violent extremism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nuclear weapons, democracy, religious tolerance, women's rights, and economic development in turn. In each case, Obama reframed disagreements in each of these areas by first clarifying what he believed to be the central issue of concern. Having done that, Obama

then juxtaposed and defended the American position from that of his audience. Finally, he emphasized the aspects of each issue that both sides could agree on before moving on to the next issue.

The first area of difference that Obama addressed was extreme violence. Of the seven themes Obama covered in the speech's latter half, violent extremism was the one danger that threatened Africans, Americans and Muslims alike. Terrorism by Anti-American Muslim extremists had visited violence and terror on innocent civilians in the U.S. and in several African cities. The U.S. for its part had killed and captured thousands of Muslims in its forceful retaliation leading to accusations of excessive force, and human rights violations. In Africa, many were familiar with the tragic reality of violence because of the conflicts that had boiled over in many African countries aside from anti-American terrorism. Violent extremism was truly a mutual concern for all in Obama's audience. Confronting terrorism, Obama started by dismissing speculation that America was on a crusade against Islam. He however went on to warn sternly that the U.S. would "relentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security—because we reject the same thing that people of all faiths reject: the killing of innocent men, women, and children." Even as he was insisting on defending American interests, he did so by drawing on a mutual self-interest argument to reinforce the fact that violence was a danger to Muslims, Africans and Americans. As he said, "the sooner the extremists are isolated and unwelcome in Muslim communities, the sooner we will be all safer." By speaking of violent extremism as a threat against all humanity, Obama turned American outrage over terrorist attacks, Muslim anger over torture, wrongful detention, and collateral death into to a common vehicle of distaste for violence in general. This was the genius of the Cairo speech. His entire discussion of the seven themes found a way to cultivate mutuality and concord in each area without minimizing the perspectives of rhetorical others.

Next, Obama turned to Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “America’s bonds with Israel are well known,” he explained, before acknowledging that “it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people – Muslims and Christian – have suffered in pursuit of a homeland.” Once he had acknowledged the legitimacy of both Israeli and Palestinian claims, Obama argued for what he believed to be the ideal solution to the impasse; a two-state solution. Obama believed a two state solution was the best way forward not only because of parochial state-strategic reasons, or because of a belief in dispensationalist theology. Giving both Palestinians and Israelis a home in the disputed territories worked for Obama because it was “in Israel’s interests, Palestine’s interest, and the world’s interest.” If, as he pointed out, Jerusalem could be a religious home for Christians, Jews, and Muslim’s alike, it was imperative that the territories be made available for occupation by the adherents each faith tradition. In Obama’s pluralistic view the fact that both Palestinians and Israelis claimed the land did not mean that both people groups could not have a shared interest in the land.

Obama followed the same pattern when he addressed the next two topics, nuclear weapons and democracy. As he explained, his concern with Iran’s violation of nuclear non-proliferation treaties was that if Tehran procured a nuclear weapon, this could set off a new arms race that could have a deleterious effect both regional and global peace; “But it is clear to all concerned that when it comes to nuclear weapons, we have reached a decisive point. This is not simply about America’s interests. It’s about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path.”³⁵ Again, he turned what had been an exclusively American concern into a matter of global interest.

On democracy, Obama acknowledged that there were legitimate concerns that America was advancing its national interests under the guise of advancing liberty and justice for all. Responding to this cynicism, Obama clarified that in his support for democracy, he realized that “no system of

government can and should be imposed by one nation [on] any other.” He had a wide enough conception of democracy that he was comfortable with different permutations of democratic process in different nations. On religious freedom Obama not only urged tolerance of religious diversity; he argued for religious plurality as a basis for a new approach to some of the worst problems afflicting humanity. Turning to women’s rights, he first acknowledged “that there is a healthy debate on this issue.” However, that did not mean Obama would shy away from defending his own position: “I reject the view of some in the West that a woman who chooses to over her hair is somehow less equal, but I do believe that a woman who is denied education is denied equality.” In the last issue that Obama addressed in Cairo, development, he agreed that technological advances could sometimes have controversial effects on society. Faced with inevitability of progress, Obama however refused to see those controversies as reasons to fear innovation altogether. Taking the ecumenical position once again, Obama explained that a healthy coexistence could be fostered between and the maintenance of each society’s idiosyncratic customs and social advancement.

If the Cairo speech explained and enacted the kind of cooperative diplomacy the Obama doctrine inaugurated, Obama’s Accra address³⁶ was much more explicit and forthright on how Obama envisioned Africa. Unlike in Cairo where he began by announcing his intentions to begin afresh, in Accra Obama started off by situating Africa on the world stage. In a bold contrast to the history of Africa’s status as an afterthought in global affairs, Obama emphasized that African interests were irreducible from broader human interests;

I’m speaking to you at the end of a long trip. I began in Russia for a summit between two great powers. I traveled to Italy for a meeting of the world’s leading economies. And I’ve come here to Ghana for a simple reason: The 21st century will be shaped by what happens not just in Rome or Moscow or Washington, but by what happens in Accra as well.³⁷

Obama understood the world as a global village. However, unlike Neil Postman's global village which was "populated by strangers who knew nothing but the most superficial facts about each other,"³⁸ Obama saw his plight as fundamentally bound to that of his African neighbors. For him Africa was neither a far-flung place somewhere in the recesses of the imagination, nor was it an idea mediated by the zero-sum logics of the war frame. It was real continent with many real places and real people. As he said, "I do not see the countries and peoples of Africa as a world apart; I see Africa as fundamental part of our interconnected world – as partners with America on behalf of the future we want for all of our children."³⁹ Unlike Bush's investment trope, Obama only wanted secure future for all children not just Americans.

Even though his speech in Ghana lacked the charm of practiced traditional greetings and a sweeping account of human history noting Africa's contributions to the progress of humanity like the Cairo speech had done, structurally the speeches were very similar. The speech opened with a broad argument for the vision he wanted to accomplish in Africa followed by detailed discussion of democracy, economics, public health, and peace and conflict resolution. In Cairo Obama had used Islam's long coexistence with American society to justify his interest in restarting the relationship with Muslim world. In Accra, he offered an inspiring belief in the capacity of ordinary Africans to realize their ambitions as the impetus for a new partnership. For Obama ordinary Africans were the lynchpin to Africa's success,

This is a new moment of great promise. Only this time, we've learned that it will not be giants like Nkurumah and Kenyatta who will determine Africa's future. Instead it will be you -- the men and women in Ghana's parliament – the people you represent. It will be young people brimming with talent and energy and hope who can claim the future that so many in previous generations never realized.⁴⁰

This was a stirring endorsement of the people that are often maligned by greed and ambition of African dictators. In speaking directly to the people Obama communicated a confidence to them that is seldom bestowed. In addition, he was describing both progress and history as determined by the experiences of the whole human population, not just the elite few. “History,” he noted “is on the side of these brave Africans, not those who use coups or change constitutions to stay in power.”⁴¹

In addition to issuing the challenge about the future, Obama challenged Africans to direct their attention to local problems. Addressing the problem of conflict around the continent, he entreated his audience to value their commonalities over superficial differences. He put it this way; “defining oneself in opposition to someone who belongs to a different tribe or worships a different prophet has no place in the 21st Century.” Instead, Obama wanted people to focus on the fact that all people “share common aspirations – to live in peace and security; to access education and opportunity; to love our families and our communities and our faith. That is our common humanity.” The implication was that losing sight of fundamental human concerns was tantamount to the loss of the shared currency of humanity. Without that mutual human basis, there was no other basis on which to relate. This, one might say, was Obama’s recognition of the importance of stasis to the survival of the human race.

Beyond the mutual basis for relation which he endorsed, Obama expressed that he valued African self-determination as well. He thus refused to prescribe solutions to Africa’s problems other. Rather, Obama gave the burden of Africa’s future to the continent’s citizens. Through his encouragement for Africans’ to influence both their immediate and more distant futures, Obama empowered Africans especially the youth to recognize the power they had. His refrain that “Africa’s future is up to Africans,” captured this sentiment succinctly. Thus the vision he had of Africa was

of peoples that had the potential to affect their environments in ways of their own choosing who were motivated by their sense of belonging to the larger human family. Though this may seem mundane, Obama's view of Africa populated by autonomous individuals who have real power represented a significant shift from the Cold War perspective of Africans as pawns.

When it came to defending his Africa policy, Obama carefully avoided any impression that the U.S. wanted to impose its perspective on Africa. As he had done in Cairo, he defended the value of democracy by noting that "the essential truth of democracy is that each nation determines its own destiny. As he concluded his the speech, Obama reiterated the theme that dominated both of his two Africa speeches; "We all share common aspirations – to live in peace and security; to love our families and our communities and our faith. That is our common humanity." Unlike Bush, he did not value any single religion or creed above all others. His appeal was grounded in the most common denominator that people around the world share; the humanity of all people.

Despite Obama's attempts to broaden the basis of the U.S.'s engagement in Africa, his message of empowerment did not impress everyone. There were those who were skeptical about the authenticity of Obama's hopes for Africa. Firoze Manji, the editor of a progressive African-centered news and publishing outfit, was nonplussed by Obama's speech. Manji argued that Obama's partnership and empowerment themes were ruses to avoid confronting the culpability of African dictators and West's meddling in Africa.⁴² It is true that Obama could have confronted Africa's corrupt leaders more directly. Even though he decried corruption and bad governance, he did not name a single corrupt African leader. While possible reasons for why Obama chose this less confrontational route are beyond the scope of this study, this fact alone was not enough to dampen optimistic vision of Africa Obama's speech had painted.

Even with the criticism, the approach to Africa Obama broached in the discourse from the early days of his presidency moved U.S.-Africa relations decidedly beyond the frame of war. From Thomas Jefferson's arguments for war with the north-African states of Algeria, Libya, and Morocco in run up to the Barbary Wars early in the nineteenth century, to Bush's impassioned battle cry in the twenty-first century, America has dealt with Africa primarily through the lens of war and violence. Obama, at least in his rhetoric, broke with the tradition of viewing Africa as a pawn of American interests. Even though Obama proposed a similar suite of proposals for Africa policy as did Bush, he did so on the basis of entirely different assumptions and expectations.

Conclusion

Despite George W. Bush's celebrated increases in aide to African nations, and the excitement generated by his two visits to the continent, American influence in Africa was actually lower at the end of the Bush presidency than it had been during the decade of the 1990s.⁴³ In the words of one scholar, the United States had "failed to bring the New Frontier and Great Society to Africa."⁴⁴ Another put it this way; "Washington seems to have lost a step in its African reach and cluout."⁴⁵ The rise of China and relative decline of U.S. influence around the world, the unpopular war Iraq, and global economic decline are all cited as common reasons for the decrease in U.S. influence in Africa. Surprisingly few people key in on the American government's poor commitment to long term policy goals in its Africa policy as an important cause for Africa's slow but certain turn eastward.

Part of the problem is that most analyses of foreign policy do not draw enough on rhetorical theory to be able to identify the conditions that promote healthy rhetorical situations in international

⁴³Chester Crocker's concluding chapter in *U.S. Africa Policy beyond the Bush years*, for example, vaguely addresses this concern when it calls for the incoming administration to "build Africa as a major factor" in foreign policy.

relations. In his recent book, *The United States in Africa*, Raymond Copson notes, for example that since World War II, U.S. Africa policymakers tend to operate from the perspectives of realism and idealism.⁴⁶ Donald Rothchild likewise noted that international relations scholars “make an important distinction between state-strategic [i.e. realist] and human security [i.e. idealist] approaches in determining the direction of U.S. policy toward Africa.”⁴⁷ Despite frequent use among political scientists and policymakers, idealism and realism do not go far enough in explaining the complexities of American foreign policy. Obama and Bush’s Africa policies for example, though ostensibly similar in content, did not originate from similar motives and did not aspire to the same objectives because the two presidents espoused fundamentally different views of the world and America’s role in it. As long as Africa policy is understood narrowly from the perspectives of realism and idealism, it will be difficult to see the importance of building stasis in U.S.-Africa relations. A rhetorical understanding of why and how relationships between nations work is indispensable from a complete account of the relative failure of African policy. Turning to stasis theory as I have here, clearly demonstrates why Bush’s efforts in Africa did not breath new air into U.S.-Africa relations. Rather than suggest that we abandon the traditional methods in international relations, my goal in this chapter has been to show how rhetorical theories in general, and stasis theory in particular can provide incisive analyses of the dynamics of international relations.

From this view, it was Obama, who, through the positive vision of Africa portrayed in his early presidential discourse, signaled towards a foreign policy philosophy that is commensurate with the rhetorical foreign policy I am suggesting here. As we near the end of Obama’s first term in office, it is safe to note that Obama’s egalitarian foreign policy has not transformed the conduct of bi and multilateral relations across the world. Still, the pursuit of an Africa policy built with significant input from Africans themselves remains is a venerable standard for Africa policy to pursue.

- ¹ George W. Bush, "President and Mrs. Bush Discuss Africa Policy, Trip to Africa " <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/02/20080214.html>.
- ² Barack Obama, "U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa," ed. The White House (Washington D.C. 2012).
- ³ Ibid., i.
- ⁴ Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power*: 172-7.
- ⁵ Barack Obama, "The American Moment: Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs," http://www.barackobama.com/2007/04/23/the_american_moment_remarks_to.php; Obama for America, "Strengthening our common security by investing in our common humanity," (Obama for America, 2008); Barack Obama, "AIPAC Policy Forum," http://www.barackobama.com/2007/03/02/aipac_policy_forum.php.
- ⁶ Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2007): 4.
- ⁷ Barack Obama, "Inaugural address," ed. White House Documents and Publications (Washington, D.C. 2009).
- ⁸ Otto Alvin Loeb Dieter, "Stasis," *Speech Monographs* 17, no. 4 (1950); Wayne N. Thompson, "Stasis in Aristotle's rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58, no. 2 (1972).
- ⁹ Dieter, "Stasis," 350.
- ¹⁰ Moussa Diop Mboup, "The Africans' Perception of the United States' Post-9/11 Africa Policy and AFRICOM" (The United States Army Command and General Staff College 2008), 2.
- ¹¹ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003). 40.
- ¹² Nicolas Van De Walle, "US policy towards Africa: The Bush legacy and the Obama administration," *African Affairs* 109, no. 434 (2010): 2-3.
- ¹³ Jennifer G. Cooke et al., *U.S. Africa Policy beyond the Bush years : critical choices for the Obama administration* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS Press, 2009). 1.
- ¹⁴ Peter J. Schraeder, *United States foreign policy toward Africa : incrementalism, crisis, and change* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). 27.
- ¹⁵ Walter Goldschmidt and Assembly American, "The United States and Africa," Published for the American Assembly, Columbia University by F.A. Praeger, <http://books.google.com/books?id=m4sFAQAIAAJ>.
- ¹⁶ Bush, "President and Mrs. Bush Discuss Africa Policy, Trip to Africa ".
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Greg Mills, "Africa's New Strategic Significance," *Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2004): 158-9.
- ¹⁹ Malinda Smith, ed. *Securing Africa : Post 9/11 Discourses on Terrorism* (Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2010), 6. Italics in original.
- ²⁰ See Phil Graham, Thomas Keenan, and Anne-Maree Dowd, "A Call to Arms at the End of History: A Discourse—Historical Analysis of George W. Bush's Declaration of War on Terror," *Discourse & Society* 15, no. 2-3 (2004); Douglas Kellner, "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the "War on Terror"," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007).
- ²¹ George W. Bush, "President Declares "Freedom at War with Fear" " <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.
- ²² Philip Wander, "The rhetoric of American foreign policy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 4 (1984): 342.
- ²³ Cooke et al., *U.S. Africa Policy beyond the Bush years : critical choices for the Obama administration*: 143.
- ²⁴ Mark 16:15 NIV
- ²⁵ Bush, "President and Mrs. Bush Discuss Africa Policy, Trip to Africa ".
- ²⁶ Cooke et al., *U.S. Africa Policy beyond the Bush years : critical choices for the Obama administration*: 16.
- ²⁷ Phillip Carter III, "U.S. Policy in Africa in the 21st Century," State Department, <http://www.state.gov/p/af/rls/rm/2009/117326.htm>.
- ²⁸ Letitia Lawson, "U.S. Africa Policy Since the Cold War," *Strategic Insights* 6, no. 1 (2007); Stephen F. Burgess, "U.S. Africa Command, Changing Security Dynamics, and Perceptions of U.S. Africa Policy," (U.S. Air Force Academy, Institute for National Security, 2008).
- ²⁹ Burgess, "U.S. Africa Command, Changing Security Dynamics, and Perceptions of U.S. Africa Policy," 6.
- ³⁰ Robert Gates, "Defense Secretary Gates Announces Creation of U.S. Africa Command," U.S. AFRICOM Public Affairs,, <http://www.africom.mil/getArticle.asp?art=5458&lang=0>.
- ³¹ Burgess, "U.S. Africa Command, Changing Security Dynamics, and Perceptions of U.S. Africa Policy," 12.
- ³² Bush, "President and Mrs. Bush Discuss Africa Policy, Trip to Africa ".
- ³³ Van De Walle, "US policy towards Africa: The Bush legacy and the Obama administration," 13.

³⁴ Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom: Transacting the Mythos of Change in the 2008 Presidential Campaign."

³⁵ Obama, "On a new beginning."

³⁶ Obama, "Remarks by the president to the Ghanaian Parliament."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Neil Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death : public discourse in the age of show business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986). 67.

³⁹ Obama, "Remarks by the president to the Ghanaian Parliament."

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Firoze Manji, "Obama in Ghana: The speech he might have made," Pambazuka News, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/57787>.

⁴³ Cooke et al., *U.S. Africa Policy beyond the Bush years : critical choices for the Obama administration*. 142-3.

⁴⁴ Larry Grubbs, *Secular missionaries : Americans and African development in the 1960s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009). 187.

⁴⁵ Cooke et al., *U.S. Africa Policy beyond the Bush years : critical choices for the Obama administration*. 208.

⁴⁶ Raymond W. Copson, *The United States in Africa : Bush policy and beyond* (London; New York; Cape Town, South Africa; New York: Zed Books ; David Philip ; Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). 5-6, 8

⁴⁷ Donald S. Rothchild and Edmond J. Keller, eds., *Africa-US relations : strategic encounters* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 248.

CHAPTER V: Conclusion and Future Research

I have argued in the preceding chapters that the rhetoric of President Barack Obama's presents a vision of Africa that strains against the conventional wisdom about the continent. In Chapter two, I contrasted Obama's dynamic view of the continent with static views implicit in mainstream media's coverage of his 2006 trip. The chapter showed that rather than naively embracing popular ideas of Africa, Obama built his own visions of African life from his experiences in Kenya. Central to Obama's invocation of alternative ideas of Africa was the process of rhetorical invention of the sense of place through the notion of heterotopias. According to the account Obama gives of his time in Kenya in *Dreams*, he developed his own ideas about the African space. In so doing, he not only challenged the static conceptions of Africa that prevailed at the time, he also showed that the meanings of Africa like those of other places are dynamic and always changing.

Chapter three argued that during the 2008 campaign, Africa served as a proxy for competing ideals for the composition of American society. I showed that Obama's opponents on the far right opposed him, in part, because they saw him as a metonymy for an idea of America that they could not tolerate because it was too admixive. To them, Obama represented an idea of American society infiltrated by influences from abroad. Since the birthers did object as viscerally to Obama's ties to Indonesia as they did to his African connection, it is reasonable to infer that what they found most objectionable about his "foreign influences" was that Obama represented the infusion of an African dimension into the American narrative. By contrast, Obama spoke of himself the metonymic embodiment for a different version of the American Dream. In his campaign speeches, Obama believed in and sold a version of the American Dream in which both his Kenyan and Kansas roots were a part. In other words, he saw himself as a representative of the idea that his difference, as expressed by African heritage, was a fundamental part of American society.

The most recent chapter contrasted the Africa policies of Obama and George W. Bush to make two important arguments. First, I showed how Obama's idea of partnership with African nations meant something entirely different from what was meant in George W. Bush's use of the language of partnership. Second, the chapter showed how Obama's Africa policy broke with the longstanding tradition in official U.S. Africa policy of dealing with African nations as pawns and accessories to American wars. By substituting human rights—a universal concern—for narrow American interests as the basis for U.S.-Africa policy, Obama's discourse heralded a turn from the realism to humanism in the U.S government's policy for African nations.

In addition to juxtaposing Obama's African ideas to those of other people, each chapter borrowed from and made modest contributions to rhetorical theory. Chapter two drew on the idea of *topoi* and rhetorical invention to document the progression Obama went through as he was forming his personal impressions of African life. In turn, I suggested a new form of discourse that I called heterotopic discourse. Heterotopic rhetoric is that discourse that is used to imbue space with a symbolic significance other than that which is recognized by the local culture. At the same time that Obama used heterotopic discourse to challenge static conceptions of Africa, he showed the potential that such discourse has for allowing individuals to find security through their reinterpretation of spaces.

The third chapter relied on rhetorical tropes to show the concrete role language played in the staging of African visions during the 2008 campaign. From this discussion, I argued that cultural orders of knowledge are structured through tropes. Furthermore I suggested that each trope's mode of figuration plays a specific role in the development of a society's body of knowledge. The first three tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche—all assume and strive to preserve the knowledge system adhered to within a culture. Irony is the only mode of tropology that does not merely

acquiesce to the perspective of any cultural worldview. Rather, irony compares between the ways different that cultures understand the world. Thus the chapter's contribution to the conversation about tropes was to suggest that the ironic mode is best suited to political discourse in a democracy.

Chapter four for its part, dealt with argumentation theory. I used the classical rhetorical idea of stasis to explain why it has been difficult to sustain cordial and mutually beneficent relations between the United States and African nations. I argued that Obama, by attempting to ground U.S.-Africa relations in human rights had identified a meaningful point of stasis where the mutual interests of African nations and those of the U.S. could converge without a preference either side. The important take away from that chapter was the applicability of rhetorical theory for understanding international relations. Without donning a rhetorical lens it would not be possible to see clearly the differences between Bush and Obama's visions of Africa as clearly.

Implications

The first implication of the findings of this study is an instrumental implication. It stems from a view of rhetoric as something that humans use in response to the world. As I noted earlier, rhetoric in both its practice and study plays a significant role in geopolitics mainly because ideas about places are formed discursively. The study of language, especially that of language's persuasive function, can be critical for the construction of perceptions about places that advance the causes of general human wellbeing. Regions such as Africa that are much maligned in public discourse stand to benefit from more articulations of positive rhetorical re-imaginings as presented in Obama's discourse. I realize that what I am saying when taken to the extreme might sound like a call for the admissibility of any perceptions of Africa that opposes the oppressive visions of colonialism. To be clear, the only support for the "re-making" of Africa implied by this study is limited only to those ideas that, like Obama's, promote the freedom, democracy, and wellbeing of all humans.

Second, this study shows some of the ways that rhetoric, place, and power are intricately interwoven. The practice of conjuring up ideas about places is deeply intertwined with questions about the distribution of power within society. Claiming for oneself a sense of what a place signifies as I show Obama to have done in chapter two, is an important way of asserting control over aspects of one's life. Beyond that, chapters three and four show the potential the national and international ramifications of thinking and speaking of places differently. All three accounts demonstrate the mutual imbrication rhetoric has with place politics.

Thirdly, this study models the importance of accounting for all the places that important figures such as Obama grew came into contact with as a matter of political and presidential history. Conducting research on only the most famous place that influential individuals like Obama come into contact with risks overlooking important insights into the individual's development. While it is not clear right now, Obama's visions of Africa may well prove to have broad historical significance.

Future Research

There are numerous questions that this study leaves unanswered. First and foremost, it is not clear what role ideas about Africa will play in American politics in light of Obama's innovative vision. After the promising start hinted in his discourse and policy proclamations, the Obama administration has continued Bush era tactics of engaging with Africa in three important areas; the running of AFRICOM, development policy, and HIV/AIDS policy. While this fact alone does not undo the visions of Africa I have documented in Obama's discourse in the preceding, there is need for a critical assessment of what extent the ideas propagated in Obama's discourse have had an impact on the broad trajectory of American policy in Africa. There is a need to follow up on the ways that Obama's African connection continues to function on the domestic political scene. At this writing, only months removed from the 2012 elections, it is clear that Africa is a category that

will continue to haunt the politics of Barack Obama. In Chapter II, I argued that in 2008, Africa functioned as a proxy for competing visions of American ideals. Only posterity will tell whether this will be true in 2012 and beyond.

A second broad vein of questioning suggested by this study has to do with the efficacy of spatial imaginations in the face of stark material conditions. The fact Obama's re-discovery of the meanings of Africa helped him find personal peace does not mean that the same will be true for everyone who challenges prevailing perceptions about the places of one's life. Merely rethinking a place will not by itself change the complexities of life. This, however, is not to deny the potency of spatial imagination. It is rather a call for more attention to questions about how an idea of a place fits with the other conditions that go into defining perceptions of that place.

There is also a need to better understand the connection between rhetoric, place and politics. In a sense, this study applied what is known about the political significance of spatial imaginations. What the study did not do is fully account for the ways that discourse about places can be put to the service of political goals. Even though I suggested that there are forms of discourse that function to generate impressions about places, the rhetorical conventions of heterotopic discourse can be better refined. In particular, it is not clear yet what conditions are conducive to heterotopic discourse. I suspect that the ability to rhetorically challenge the meanings of a place will turn on factors about the rhetor, the popularity of existing conceptions of the place, the stakes involved for the implicated audience, and momentum for maintaining the status quo. Further, even when conditions that are conducive to a rethinking of places exist, the existence of a heterotopic idea about a place will not be enough to renew the general perceptions of that place. It is only the genesis of a complex process. Thus what is needed additionally is a focused study on rhetoric's function in the ebb and flow of ideas about places.

Finally, two of the three theoretical ideas this study invite further investigation. In Chapter two, I referred to rhetorical invention as the process of discovering places where rhetorical assertions “hang together” in a way that persuades an audience. I argued that Obama’s discourse clearly demonstrated that the idea of invention as place making is translatable to spatial discourse. In treating heterotopias as a mode of discourse and not just a type of place, this study applied the concept heterotopia in a novel way. Still, it is not clear whether the topological metaphor is applicable to the reinvigoration of all types of spaces. Additionally, studies need to explore heterotopic discourse’s creation of the six functions by which Foucault identified heterotopias. This study only confirmed that Obama’s discourse engaged two of the six types of heterotopias on Foucault’s original list.

In chapter three I argued for a distinct preference for irony out of the “four master tropes” as a safeguard from the threat of tyranny of symbols. I argued that Obama by embracing both his African and American roots deployed a version of the American Dream that is ironic. This suggests that the ironic, when taken as an epistemological mode might be a viable means of diffusing the animosities of discourse in the public sphere. Future researchers could look into whether the ironic mode works as a corrective, or whether it is effective only when applied in conjunction with the other modes of tropological reasoning.

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